とある魔術の電脳戦機
とある魔術の禁書目録×電脳戦機バーチャロン
鎌池和馬
イラスト◎カトキハジメ
キャラクターデザイン◎
はいむらきよたか・
カトキハジメ・竹
電撃文庫

Toaru Majutsu no Index — Virtual On

Contents

- Illustrations
- Preface
- Terminology
- Prologue
- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Epilogue
- Afterword
- Credits

とある魔術の電脳戦機（バーチャロン）
とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）×電脳戦機バーチャロン
鎌池和馬
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とある魔術の禁書目録×電脳戦機バーチャロン

とある魔術の電脳戦機

学園都市で、大人気となった次世代競技がある。実際の街並みに出現する巨大なバーチャロイドで行う格闘戦。その正式名称は『電脳戦機バーチャロン』。超能力者だろうが無能力者だろうが、テクニックさえあれば誰もが対等に渡り合えるため、学園都市の生徒間で爆発的に広まっていった。

白の意匠でカスタマイズされたバル・バドスを専用機とするインデックスと、初期装備テムジン機の上条当麻がバトルを開始したその日。

「濃錦。富良科濃錦です。私はリリナではありません……むにゃ……」

寝不足気味の少女が学園都市に降り立った。そして、上条は遭遇する。通常のバーチャロンでは起きてはならない未曾有のアクシデントに。

か-12-69

とある魔術の禁書目録×電脳戦機バーチャロン
とある魔術の電脳戦機
鎌池和馬
電撃文庫

ISBN978-4-04-865945-1
C0193 ¥670E

ASCII MEDIA WORKS
アスキー・メディアワークス
KADOKAWA 発行●株式会社KADOKAWA

定価：本体670円
※消費税8%税込価格です

とある魔術の禁書目録 × VIRTUAL ON CYBER TROOPERS

鎌池和馬

今回はバーチャロンとのコラボなのでコメントもでっかいの頼む！　某所にて撮ってきた1枚です。真ん中辺りのボックスのとこで2人の頭くらいの高さなんですけど。……い、一体何を出し入れするというんだ……？

【電撃文庫作品】

とある魔術の禁書目録①～㉒
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簡単なモニターです
ヴァルトラウテさんの婚活事情
未踏召喚：// ブラッドサイン①～④
とある魔術のヘヴィーな座敷童が簡単な殺人鬼の婚活事情
最強ごうせいぺもカス雑魚ベアトリーチェの最近 totalふぁ～
とある魔術の禁書目録×電脳戦機バーチャロン　とある魔術の電脳戦機

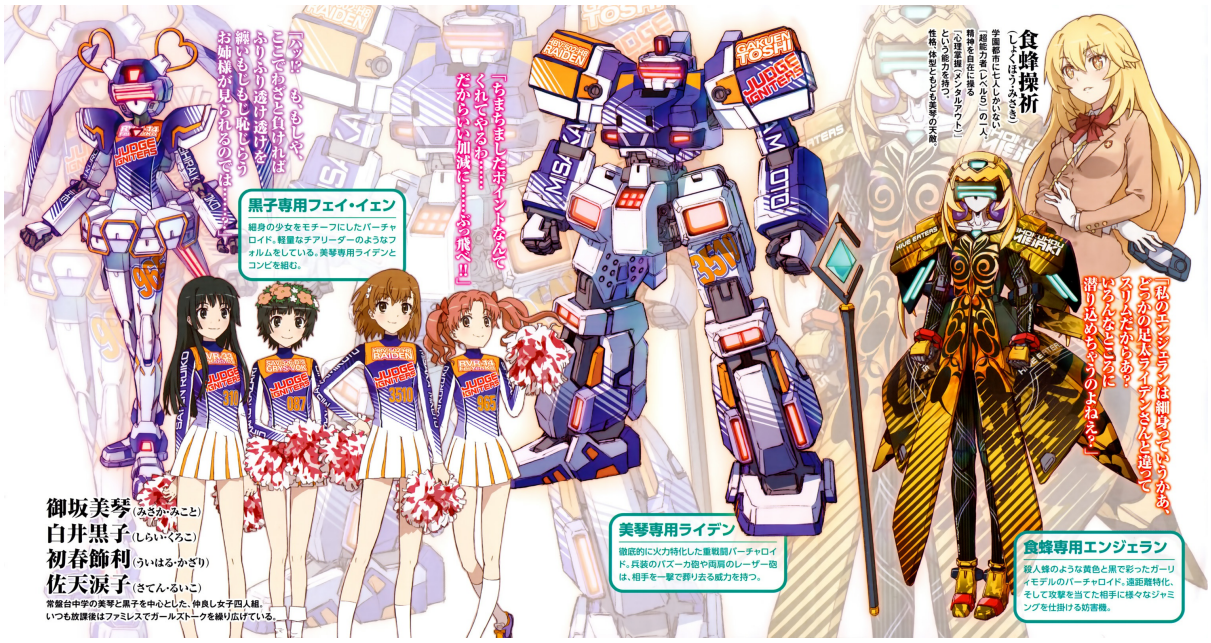
イラスト：カトキハジメ

メカデザイナー。「電脳戦機バーチャロン」の全バーチャロイドデザイン、イラストを手がける。最新の仕事として、「機動戦士ガンダムTHE ORIGIN」「機動戦士ガンダム サンダーボルト」のメカニックデザインを担当している。

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）×電脳戦機バーチャロン
とある魔術の電脳戦機
バーチャロン
鎌池和馬 イラスト／カトキハジメ
キャラクターデザイン／はいむらきよたか・カトキハジメ・竹
©SEGA CHARACTER DESIGN:KATOKI HAJIME

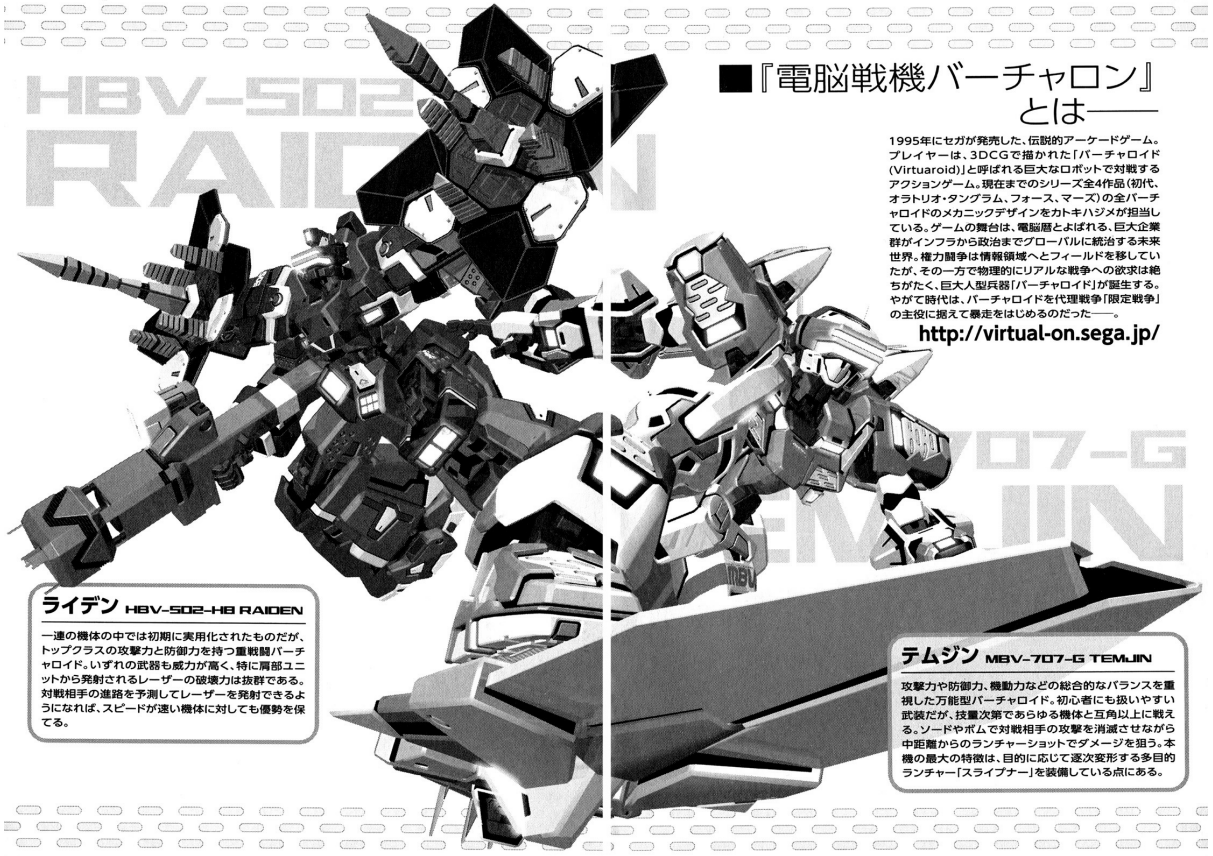
020 序章
024 第一章
114 第二章
324 第三章
384 第四章
442 終章
CONTENTS
DESIGNED BY HIROKAZU WATANABE(2725 INC.)

インデックス
「私はバーチャロンを次世代競技用などというものではなく、旧来の形に戻す！」
インデックス専用バル・パドス
下半身パーツを自由に変換できるバーチャロイド「バル」シリーズの二足歩行型タイプ。両腕そのものが砲になっているのが特徴。インデックスが自身をモチーフにカスタマイズしている。
ブルーストーカー
ユーザーネームが文字化けしている、謎のカスタム機。ネーミングの由来は、機体カラーリングから、空中での機動力に特化した「サイファー」カスタムにもかかわらず、「飛行形態」に一切変じないらしい。
上条当麻
「テムジンはこれといった特徴がない代わりに、どんな機体でも持っている苦手な部分を切り込む事ができる機体なんだ!!」
上条専用テムジン
次世代競技「バーチャロン」を初プレイした上条が使用するバーチャロイド。すべてにおいて平均的、万能型のスペックで、初心者にも扱いやすい。状況に応じて、主兵装をセイバー（剣）やランチャーに転換できる。


食蜂操祈
「私のエンジェランは細身っていうかあ、どうかの丸バライアンさんと違ってスリムだからあ？いろんなところに潜り込めちゃうのよねえ～」
食蜂専用エンジェラン
蜂人蜂のような黄色と黒で彩ったガーリィモデルのバーチャロイド。遠距離特化、そして攻撃を当てた相手に様々なジャミングを仕掛ける妨害機。
「ちまちまましたポイントなんてくれてやるわ……だからいい加減に……ぶっ飛べ!!」
美琴専用ライデン
徹底的に火力特化した重戦闘バーチャロイド。兵装のバズーカ砲や両肩のレーザー砲は、相手を一撃で葬り去る威力を持つ。
「ハッ!?　も、もしや、ここでわざと負ければふりふり透け透けを纏いもしもし麻しろうお姉様が見られるのでは……」
黒子専用フェイ・イェン
細身の少女をモチーフにしたバーチャロイド。軽量なチアリーダーのようなフォルムをしている。美琴専用ライデンとコンビを組む。
御坂美琴（みさかみこと）
白井黒子（しらいくろこ）
初春飾利（ういはるかざり）
佐天涙子（さてんるいこ）
常盤台中学の美琴と黒子を中心とした、仲良し女子四人組。いつも放課後はファミレスでガールストークを繰り広げている。

Preface

What is Cyber Troopers Virtual-On?



A legendary arcade game released by Sega in 1995. An action game in which the player fought using giant robots known as Virtuaroids that were drawn in 3DCG. The series has 4 games in total (Original, Oratorio Tangram, Force, Marz) and all of the Virtuaroids' mech designs were done by Katoki Hajime. The games take place in a future world known as the Virtual Century where giant global corporations rule everything from infrastructure to politics. The struggle for power has shifted to the field of cyberspace, but the desire for real war in the physical world has not died out and the giant humanoid weapons known as Virtuaroids were born. Ultimately, an age of Limited War begins where the Virtuaroids are used for proxy wars. http://virtual-on.sega.jp/

MBV-707-G Temjin

A multipurpose Virtuaroid with a focus on overall balance between offense, defense, and mobility. Easy to use for beginners, but can fight on equal or greater footing to any other Virtuaroid when used with the proper skill. Obliterates the opponent's attacks with a sword or bombs while aiming for damage with a launcher at midrange. Its greatest feature is Sleipnir, a multiuse launcher that transforms to match its current purpose.

HBV-502-HB Raiden

Of all the Virtuaroids, this was the very first to be implemented, but it also has top-class offense and defense. All of its weapons are powerful and the lasers fired from its shoulder units are especially destructive. If it can predict its opponent's path and fire its lasers there, it can maintain an advantage over faster units.

RVR-14 Fei-Yen Kn

Covers for its low defense with top-class mobility and speed. If its swift speed and endless attacks can run circles around its opponent, it can maintain an advantage in a shooting battle or a close-range battle. After taking a certain amount of damage, it enters hyper mode and turns gold, increasing its offense and defense.

RVR-87 Specineff

A Virtuaroid with a grim reaper-like appearance. In addition to the ability to seal away its opponent's weapons, its penetrating attacks can do damage even through obstacles. It also has high mobility in close-range battles. However, its high offensive power is combined with extremely low defensive power, so precise dodging technique is needed to win.

XBV-819-tr4 Bal-Bados

A special Virtuaroid that can separate its launcher and attack. It can pummel its opponent

with highly seeking mines and highly negating ring beams. Its complex attack method requires a lot of skill to use it well, but if it can place its separated launcher in its opponent's blind spot, it can gain a great advantage in battle.

SGV-417-L Angelan

Uses irregular attacks such as summoning an ice dragon or light bullets that freeze its opponent. It can continue moving without a gap after a dash attack. Its high-quality armor can deflect many attacks, but the unit itself is not very sturdy and small mistakes can lead to major damage. A combat style focused on dodging is needed.

RVR-42 Cypher

A Virtuaroid that trades defense for top-class midair mobility. It has high offensive ability and can attack twice during a midair dash, so it will not let its opponent approach easily. If its

charge attack hits in its fighter plane form, it can do major damage even to a heavyweight opponent.

SAV-326-D/9 Grys-Vok

A full-body armory Virtuaroid. The missiles it can fire in great quantity have excellent seeking ability and its power is greater the further from its opponent it is. It reloads its missiles quickly, so it can fire in quick succession. If it can maintain a decent distance from its opponent, it can maintain a one-sided battle.

RVR-39 Apharmd B

A Virtuaroid specialized for hand-to-hand combat with beam tonfas equipped on both arms. It has excellent dashing ability and a wide effective range for its close-range attacks, so it can actively aim for direct attacks with its tonfas. If it can use napalm and other weapons to effectively keep its opponent close, it demonstrates overwhelming strength.

RVR-68 Dordray

An assault Virtuaroid with high defense and offense. The drill on its left arm can penetrate obstacles, allowing it to attack its opponent even if they are hiding behind an obstacle. If it can separate the claw on its right arm to hold its opponent in place, it can aim for more reliable damage.

Terminology

What is the Cyber Troopers Virtual-On as a Next Generation Game?

A fighting game played using giant Virtuaroids that appear in the actual city streets. Whether a Level 5 or Level 0, anyone can fight equally as long as they have the proper technique, so it has explosively spread throughout the students of Academy City. Even when fighting in the streets, stray shots will not blow away buildings and the giant weapons will not crush passersby. The latest portable devices that have recently taken Academy City by storm are used to represent the battles. There are two ways to defeat an opponent in Next Generation Game Virtual-On. The first is to score more points than your opponent by the end of the game. The second is to destroy every member of the opposing team. Preliminary matches are being held in each of Academy City's districts and then a tournament will be held between representatives of all 23 districts. Victory there will make one the strongest player in both name and reality.

Game Rules

The game ends when one side wins two of three sets. But unlike a normal fighting game, the primary goal is not to wear down a gauge representing stamina or armor. More like judo or wrestling, the points earned from "legal blows" determine the winner (i.e. it is a form of e-sports). Virtual-On is generally won by scoring more points in two of the three sets, but KOs are also possible. And if every Virtuaroid on a team is destroyed, that team is defeated and the game ends.

Portable Device

A handheld device used to play Virtual-On. In addition to the game, the device also supports one's everyday life. Kamijou originally played Virtual-On to refill his electronic credits on the

portable device.

V-Converter

Virtuaroids do not actually exist there; they fight as materialized data. The V-Converter acts as the core of that system. The V-Disc inside is something like the blueprints for the Virtuaroid, so the V-Disc is read to materialize the Virtuaroid.

V-Crystal

A substance that accumulated in great quantities at the lunar ruins known as the Moon Gate in another world. Crushing it and applying it evenly to a giant disc creates a V-Disc, so it is the core ingredient of the V-Converter.

Cradle Station

Next Generation Game Virtual-On is generally played on a portable device, but a lot of users play by enclosing themselves in egg-shaped cradle stations installed at the centers located around Academy City. They provide a higher resolution image and slightly less latency (although the portable device is still used as the controller even inside the cradle). The difference is similar to enjoying the same video on a handheld player versus a home theater system.

Lilina

The Support AI that automatically activates when a user privately registers their portable device. A single AI is stored on each device. They primarily share information about Virtual-On and provide support during battle. They seem to have a high-level learning function, so their personality is different for every user.

Material Analyze

A service that allows a target material's traits and properties to be incorporated into a Virtuaroid just by holding the device in front of an object. This works with both mechanical and biological objects, so the structures of existing weapons or of insects and other animals can be incorporated. This extremely high level of customization is one aspect of Virtual-On.

Blue Stalker

A blue Cypher Virtuaroid. Uses a coloring not found in the defaults and its user name is corrupted. An outlaw player that intrudes on proper battles and destroys everything. Given its nickname, it seems to be pursuing someone…

Reverse Convert

A rumored feature(?) of Virtual-On in Academy City. As a Next Generation Game, Virtual-On allows users to adjust their Virtuaroid's parameters using the Material Analyze feature, but the Reverse Convert can supposedly go the other way and transfer the customized Virtuaroid's data to the player. However, there are many mysteries concerning how the Material Analyze applies altered effects to the Virtuaroid and some rumors claim these effects can reach the actual human body piloting the Virtuaroid…

The Phoenix

An underground online search engine in Academy City. It allows one to search for information not normally available, but this search engine is a crucible of malice and it will destroy the personality of any normal person who stays there for too long.

The Tangram

According to information from another dimension, it is a Space-Time Continuum Control Mechanism that can be called “the entity at the center of all things” and that is “a single entity that also simultaneously has alibis in every single parallel world”. Successfully contacting it provides control of time, causality, destiny, and all else that is similarly beyond reach, so it places the world in the palm of your hand.

L’Ln Plajiner

The girl who develops and manages all cutting-edge technology. Also the creator of the Tangram

Code Phoenix

Unknown.

Prologue

"…Kh."

For a brief moment, the spiky-haired boy named Kamijou Touma forgot where he was.

A dull pain throbbed deep in his head.

An alert stabbed into his mind more sharply than an alarm clock.

He was inside a cocoon-like spindle-shaped machine that did not feel all that large. It was strangely soft and seemed to suction itself to his back. His hands held a device only a little bigger than a box of chocolates. That device and its sticks and buttons for his thumbs were his only lifeline.

There was nothing inside the cocoon. Even without a seatbelt, his body was naturally fixed inside the seat and there were none of the monitors, buttons, and switches that would fill a fighter craft. Optional settings could alter the layout to one's liking, but the small device in his hands was all he needed to control the machine.

But no one really knew if that lifeline was really there or not.

The device and even his own existence "inside" the machine were uncertain.

But he could touch it and it would respond accordingly, so there was no problem.

"…!!"

The world rapidly opened up around him.

He was not simply receiving information through a monitor. He sat inside the cocoon-like machine, yet he could clearly sense the heat of the air, a burning smell, and even some presences and killer intent that did not fall under any of his five senses.

He finally remembered.

He raised his heavy head and bit his rusty-tasting lips.

He outputted what he needed to do.

"Listen, Temjin," he groaned. "You aren't a tool of killing. I won't let you be one."

He touched the device in his hands once more. He stroked the top of the sticks with his thumbs and confirmed its solid presence with his entire hands. He entrusted everything to it.

And he spoke.

“So help me out here. Help me save that girl!!”

Chapter 1

Part 1

It was the first day of a rare long weekend.

In a certain student dorm in Academy City's District 7, Index, a silver-haired nun in a pure white habit, rolled along the wooden floor.

"Toumaaa. The beepy thing isn't doing anything anymore."

"Hm? You're afraid of the microwave and get dizzy watching the dryer, so why are you using a handheld game system? …In fact, it's rare to see you messing with any kind of machine."

The spiky-haired boy who responded was Kamijou Touma.

Index was swinging around a mobile device just a little larger than a pencil case.

"Some important person said each defeat in Virtual-On only makes you more powerful! So I have to keep fighting and fighting to get stronger!!"

"Who in the world is that 'important person'? They must have quite an aura to get Index of all people to do what they say. Not that I'm entirely sure what this Virtual-On thing is."

It seemed to be the latest fad, but Kamijou had never touched the video game and did not know too much about it. There were posters all over Academy City, so he just knew it had to do with colorful robots fighting each other.

He glanced down at the mobile device Index handed him and messed with it for a bit.

"Oh, it's got a firmware update window. Looks like you'll have to take it into the center, Index."

"Farmware update…? But I'm not growing any grapes, Touma."

"I said firmware, not farmware." Kamijou sighed. "Well, I need to refill my credits soon anyway, so let's head down to the center together."

"Hm? You can't update it here, Touma?"

"It says it won't let you mess with anything inside to keep you from modifying any of the data."

The ultimate security was to disconnect all internet connections and remove all external memory, but that meant it all had to be contained to one machine and it could not communicate with anything else. Safety measures had reached the point of seeing how much inconvenience people were willing to put up with, but this portable device seemed to have tilted the scales quite far toward safety.

“I don’t play games much, but I still find this device in my hands a fair bit. It’s not so much that holding it calms me down. It’s more like I can’t calm down without holding it. It’s a train pass, it controls ATMs, and it lets you access recipes… Oh, and I definitely can’t go without the coupon you get just by showing them the screen at the register.”

He used the hook-like strap to hang the portable device from his belt.

“Okay, let’s get ready to head out, Index. I’ll make sure the gas is off and everything’s locked up, so you go grab the cat.”

“Roger, Touma! Heh heh heh. I can’t wait to see Bal-Bados again.”

“All those names are pretty crazy. Maybe I shouldn’t say this when you’re a real grimoire library, but they sound like part of a magic spell made after drawing a magic circle on the ground.”

“Bal-Bados looks so tasty.”

“Tast-…what!?”

“Bal-Bados looks grape flavored. Raiden would be blood orange, Specineff would be vanilla and mint, and Grys-Vok would be lime cause its green! It’s so hard to choose…drool.”

“Oh, no. Do you think they’re gummies or sodas or something!? L-let’s calm down, Index. I know it’s rude of me to say anything when you’re in gamer mode and I barely know anything about this, but based on the posters I’ve seen around, aren’t the Virtuaroids generally mechs!?”

“There’s no right answer in Cyber Imaginary Space!”

“And now you’re throwing nonsensical terminology back at me? At any rate, I’m pretty sure you’re the only person who would think those things are humanoid candy houses!”

Meanwhile, the two of them left the dorm room.

On that long weekend morning, there was not a cloud in the sky and the streets were full of people since they did not have to go to school. There were all sorts of people: a girl was jogging perhaps as part of a diet, a boy was taking a large dog for a walk, and a young man was apparently broadcasting some kind of video because he slowly spun around while pointing the lens here and there. They all held the same portable device or had them attached to their waist.

“Those things sure have gotten popular lately. Not that I’m one to talk.”

The portable devices were not really handheld games systems or mobile devices. They were seen as small boxes that could do anything. It could measure your calories, carry music around, play movies, and relay a broadcast, so its classification changed depending on who used it.

Just like people were starting to have trouble reading and writing kanji thanks to the kanji conversion on cellphones, some people were apparently having trouble with simple calculations and English words thanks to these.

“None of it can hope to match the jiggliness of the Virtuaroids. How can they stimulate my hunger so much when they’re just data?”

“As I said, they might move around smoothly, but I really don’t think they jiggle around like gummies or pudding!”

As soon as Kamijou shouted back at Index, a large shadow appeared overhead.

However, this was not due to a thick cloud covering the sun.

Two Virtuaroids bigger than school buildings were glaring at each other and clashing sword against staff.

One was Fei-Yen.

The Virtuaroid did not look much like a robot(?) thanks to its slender girl motif, its head parts were shaped like twintails, and it had special armor resembling a miniskirt around its waist. Its primary weapon was the rapier-style close-range sword in its right hand. That sword was named Kindness of the Fool and could be used both at close and long range.

The other was Angelan.

This Virtuaroid also had a girl motif, but its long ponytail and long skirt armor gave it a calmer look than Fei-Yen. Its main weapon was a staff-like device named the Staff of the Pair, but it used various long-range projectile attacks rather than fighting at close-range. In addition to simple destructive power, it gained an advantage by creating various interference effects and toying with the enemy.

They must have had some special customization done because neither one had its normal coloring. Fei-Yen had a bright purple cheerleader-like coloration and Angelan had yellow and black warning colors like a killer bee.

Kamijou did not know the details since he did not use his portable device as a game machine much, but those seemed to be the names of the Virtuaroids and weapons based on the posters he had seen around.

The machines approached and struck each other a few times with Kamijou and Index at their feet.

A gust of wind blew in and shook the leaves of the roadside trees.

With their weapons locked together, Fei-Yen and Angelan fired welding-like beams of light at each other and slid to the side.

Each increase in speed seemed to put some kind of burden on them because the giant disk-like objects attached to their backs grew ominously red with heat.

They expanded their path as if drawing a circle and finally moved behind the surrounding buildings.

A few seconds of silence followed.

Suddenly, they burst from behind different buildings and moved straight in for a clash with weapons locked together.

With their firepower, a single stray shot could bring down a building.

In fact, those overwhelmingly giant bodies would squash a human being with a careless step.

Nevertheless, Kamijou sounded carefree as he looked up at their battle.

“Ohh, they’re really going at it.”

Cyber Troopers Virtual-On.

That was the name of this next-generation contest.

At close range, the Virtuaroids wielded swords and staffs that looked like metal towers. At long range, they fired countless beams of light that seemed to be sources of intense heat. As if to represent their great mass, each movement shook the road and created a blast of wind like when a subway train passed through the tunnel. Of course, their accuracy was not 100% and stray shots were landing here and there, but no buildings crumbled despite the great explosions. There were no cracks in the walls or even broken windows.

There were roadside trees, parked cars, and even a jogging middle school girl down below, but none of them were crushed underfoot. Some of the people were casually aiming their portable devices’ cameras at them, some were shrilly cheering one or the other on, and some were walking through the streets in accordance with their own lifestyle, without paying them any heed. They all utterly lacked any fear toward those giant weapons.

Opening one’s portable device and performing a search or aiming it toward the fighting machines would likely provide more detailed information.

Some of the people on the road wore cheap earphones that let Kamijou hear the voice they were listening to.

“Okay, okay. The live DJ is here to manage the inter-district preliminary battles and link the videos together. This is DJ Nakamura Mary, the ultimate cosplayer you know for boldly attempting a Dordray costume with the giant cardboard origami that’s become the norm for robot cosplay! I’m free, so send your work this way!!”

“That’s called a kigurumi, you uncultured old hag. And try to think about the tournament’s sponsors. You can’t just advertise yourself on the job like that.”

“Shut up. And call me a young woman, you goth loli middle schooler. I have my own issues to deal with.”

“Try to stay in character.”

“Ahem. As the preliminary tournament begins across all 23 districts, one battle in particular has gained overwhelming popular in the live viewing numbers! It’s this one here in District 7! It’s a clash between two young ladies from the prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School. They have an elegance all their own!!”

As the spherical devices that acted as judges floated in the air, two shrill voices filled the air.

“Keep going, keep going!! Win here and you clear the preliminaries and you have a chance to appear in the real deal!!”

“S-stop that, Saten-san. Don’t shake Misaka-san’s shoulders! She can’t see you with those goggles on, so it catches her off guard!”

“Oh, whoops.”

“Euhh… But if we end up in the main tournament, will we have to face some even more amazing opponents, Saten-san?”

“We live in an incredible age! Level 4s and Level 5s can fight it out in the streets without holding back. But the most unbelievable part is that Level 0s like us can fight on equal or greater footing if we’re skilled enough!”

“I’m not actually a Level 0, though.”

“Uiharu, I’ll let that slide for now since I don’t want to ruin the fun mood, but we need to have a chat later.”

A girl’s scream reached Kamijou’s ears from overhead. There may have been some cheerleaders or something on the building’s roof.

Despite the fierce fighting and intense bombardments, there was no tension whatsoever.

In a way, that was to be expected.

Just before a hit, something like unnatural compression artifacts raced through it and cut it off. There was wind and shaking, but anything that would cause serious damage was cut off with top priority. That was why no one would be hurt and nothing would be destroyed. No one cared even when those extraordinarily large masses stepped over their heads. It felt more like riding an elevator than a rollercoaster. It may have been frightening if one calmly thought about it, but no one was afraid because they knew solid safety standards were being followed.

(Yet I have no idea what kind of tech is being used to make the machines float up like in the games.)

This too was the same as an elevator. Even if people knew the general idea behind it, they did not know how many safety measures were in place or what standards it had to follow. They could not list off the inspection process either, but human beings still felt like it was “safe”.

That was why the boy walking his dog and the young man broadcasting some kind of video did not tremble in fear as the giant Virtuaroids fired beams of light, created a great cacophony of noise, and shook the ground.

They were simply treated as a part of the background, so a lot of people did not bother to stop and look as they passed right by the feet of the bright purple cheerleader named Fei-Yen and the killer bee named Angelan.

“Hmm.”

“What is it, Touma?”

“Well… Let me start by saying I know a Virtuaroid is a Virtuaroid and nothing more than a Virtuaroid.”

“?”

“By the way, what do you call that twintail one?”

“Fei-Yen.”

“I thought so. That’s what the posters said. …But when I look up at Fei-Yen from this angle – how should I put it? – I feel like I’m doing something wrong. I feel like finding a proper part-time job would be better than this blasphemous feeling…”

The girl-style Fei-Yen and Angelan were continuing their high-speed battle and they would sometimes “step over” Kamijou and Index.

And as previously stated, Fei-Yen barely looked like a robot. In fact, its silhouette almost looked like a twintailed magical girl.

“Touma, that is a Virtuaroid and nothing more than a Virtuaroid, so the concept of a skirt and panties doesn’t exist there. You couldn’t peep if you wanted to, so it doesn’t count.”

“I know that. I really do. But when I look at Fei-Yen from this viewpoint, I start to wonder if no one thought about this back when it was shipped out…”

“C’mon, Touma, you’re overthinking this. Fei-Yen is Fei-Yen and it’s Fei-Yen whether you look at it from above or below. See, look at those colors and jiggling movements. It looks so delicious…drool.”

“Index!! Don’t say Fei-Yen is ‘jiggling’ and ‘delicious’! It makes you sound like an incredibly unique sort of person!!”

“???”

Kamijou and Index passed by below the two Virtuaroids on their way to District 7’s station area.

The center they were headed to was the closest supplier for the portable devices everyone had. They were technically rented, but just like train IC cards, it was more like they were given away for free. There were a lot of restrictions (such as only being able to update the firmware or refill the electronic credits at the center), but receiving such a useful device for an initial investment of zero yen did a good job of ridding people of any complaints.

Half of the center was a maintenance space for firmware updates, electronic credit refills, and customizations. The other half was filled with high-power stations. The next-generation competition of Virtual-On could be played on the portable devices, but a lot of people seemed to like closing themselves inside the egg-shaped cradle stations for higher resolution video and a greater sense of acceleration.

There were even people in the center sitting at normal benches and facing each other with their small portable devices instead of using the specialized cradle stations.

(Well, I guess it's like the difference between a handheld player and a home theater. Everyone has their own goal.)

The large screen covering one wall was divided up into dozens of sections that showed the various Virtuaroids fighting in the vicinity of the center. It looked like a screen showing security camera footage, but was it all of the tournament's preliminary contestants?

"No," answered Index. "If you battle near the center, it'll be sent here and there unless you do something special."

"Why would they-…? Oh, I get it. They've opened up the channels for people who want to do a Let's Play."

The place seemed busy as it ran the tournament and showed people around. Employees were running around the center while contacting people with their portable devices and displaying the latest battle results on a large paper on the wall.

Based on the round-robin tournament display, that Fei-Yen and Angelan from before seemed to have progressed quite far. At this rate, one or the other had a good chance of being chosen as District 7's representative.

"Hi, Kami-yan. What brings you here on our day off? Oh, were you caught in the rush to update to Ver. 20.5? C'mon, you've gotta manually click that 'check for updates' button every day."

"Aogami…? You work here?"

"I don't care about the money. I just want to be as close as possible to the moe that's in season. No one can stop these pure feelings! Ah hah hah!!"

"Uuh… So this is what happens to someone who really does go after Fei-Yen…"

"Don't be stupid!! The real moe is found when you forcibly place Guarayakha's girly motion patterns onto Dordray so that muscular construction machine wiggles cutely around!! And of course, you've gotta change the coloring and emblem!! Use all those services that are meant to give it a rough and cool emblem and make your own itasha machine with catgirls drawn all over it!!"

"I'm sorry for snapping back at you when I don't know anything about this! But could you rephrase that for someone who hasn't played the games!?"

"I'm talking about this!"

Aogami pointed at a poster on the wall. Dordray seemed to be short and stout machine that's low center of gravity and great width resembled a wall. It also had a drill and a U-shaped arm attached to its hands. And Guarayakha was a…what? It was even smaller than the girly Fei-Wen and, um…

“Guarayakha-tan is Guarayakha-tan! There’s no other way to describe her!”

“I think I’m about to give in to that intensity on your face!!”

Kamijou was almost in tears, but Index cut in from the side while waving her hand.

She pushed her portable device forward.

“Anyway, take care of this please. I want to meet my Bal-Bados again soon!”

“Sure thing. It is my job, after all. But Bal-Bados? You’re headed in a pretty twisted direction yourself.”

“I’m surprised you were completely unfazed by his nonsense, Index. Is this the composure of those who share a common language?”

“If you just need to update the firmware, you only need to open the settings screen and hit ‘update to latest version’. See? Now hit the ‘agree’ button on your own.”

No special cables were needed. A specialized wireless network for maintenance was set up inside the center.

Kamijou spoke up in exasperation as he watched the green bar move from one side of the screen to the other.

“Is there any reason to lock this thing down so much?”

“Kami-yan, you haven’t heard the rumors of the ‘Defected’ portable devices? It’s gotten a lot of attention.”

“I don’t know much about the game itself, but I saw it mentioned here and there in the online news. That’s when someone intentionally switches off the safety regulations, right? Instead of adding in modified data, I think it was more bout unlocking features that were already there, just hidden. So what is it? A debug mode that lets you change all the values for testing purposes? Or maybe something a developer put in there like writing their complaints in the empty space?”

“Either way, it lets people use all the services they normally couldn’t access. Of course, as the playerbase grows, the number of people doing stupid things will grow proportionally. 1% of 1000 people is 10 people, but 1% of 10,000 people is 100 people.”

“That’s a lot like turning off your computer’s security software, right? You can use these devices for anything, so they’re full of personal information. …Why would someone do something so risky?”

“Well, if it let me turn Dordray-tan into a cute girl, I’d ‘Defect’ right this instant.”

“Sorry, but I still don’t share that common language of yours.”

“Yeah, Dordray’s got the aura of someone with a great body hidden below.”

“Oh, this girl gets it!!”

“And would I end up like you two if I did share that language!? Are we talking about robot weapons stripping!? What does that even mean!?”

Kamijou felt left behind because he did not even understand the basics.

He glanced over at a poster on the center’s wall.

“So those…Virtuaroids are they called? Why are they all wearing the same backpack?”

“Backpack…?” Aogami Pierce looked shocked. “That’s the V-Converter. I’ll omit the details, but while Virtuaroids are masses of metal, they’re supposed to be materialized data. And the V-Converter is the core of that. The V-Disc inside is like the blueprint. The data on it is read to materialize the Virtuaroid.”

“Hmm. So data is materialized inside the game world. That’s kind of overcomplicated…”

“And the cover protecting the V-Disc is called the motor deck…but that’s not too important just for playing the game. It’s not like you get a headshot-style one-hit kill for shooting it.”

Index started hopping up and down to the side.

“It beeped! Touma, is that enough? Can I use Bal-Bados now?”

“Aogami.”

“Just try it out. Kami-yan, you’ve got a portable device even if you don’t play much Virtual-On, right? The app is installed by default.”

“No, um…”

“Th-that’s right! Touma, you should try playing Virtual-On too!! I’ll open a new door for you!! This way, Touma! This way, this way!!”

“I’m not even sure if you can play Virtual-On if you’re not in the tournament.”

“I’ll teach you everything you need to know! And of course you can! If not, everyone would have to enter the tournament without practicing!! Try actually thinking about it for two seconds!! Hmph!!”

“See? This is just like asking a cinephile if they want to see a movie to kill some time and having them list off a bunch of artsy French movies!!”

“Oh, if you’re trying to convert him, why not teach him the taste of victory by having him defeat a weak AI NPC first?”

“The joy of fighting a human opponent has to come first!!”

Aogami Pierce waved and apologized.

“Sorry. I know you came all the way to the center, but all the high-end cradle stations have been reserved by the tournament participants. They really want the clear video quality and the low latency for…well, you probably wouldn’t know what any of that means, Kami-yan. Basically, less frame lag gives them an advantage.”

“That’s fine, that’s fine. If we showed that ignorant boy the high-end stuff, it wouldn’t end well. If he starts thinking that luxury is normal, he’d never be able to use a normal portable device!”

“Oh, this girl really does get it.”

Kamijou still had no idea what was going on, but Index and the calico cat took him out of the center. Dumbing it down to talk of frame lag was already near his limit, so how was he supposed to manage any of this?

Kamijou and Index moved to the edge of the sidewalk to stay out of people’s way and then booted up their portable devices.

As for Index…

“You’re always staring down at the screen. I don’t know too much about this, but aren’t there goggles for the game?”

“Those make me dizzy,” she explained.

“Is it like 3D motion sickness? Well, as long as you’re enjoying it.”

With that, Kamijou reached for the portable device which was a little bigger than a pencil case and he disassembled it with an audible snap.

The plastic cover on the bottom of the device came off.

No, it was more than a cover.

“That should do it.”

This was something he did not often use.

Kamijou pulled out the rubber strap connected to either side and covered his eyes like it was a pair of pool goggles.

The signal from the device in his hands brought the screen to his life before his eyes.

And immediately, Kamijou Touma’s mind was flying.

He was already onboard Temjin.

Part 2

Meanwhile, some Virtuaroids had been fighting from short and long range while Kamijou and Index had walked through the city.

That was one of District 7's preliminary rounds.

The winner would qualify as a candidate for the tournament between representatives for all 23 districts.

A total of 4 Virtuaroids stood in a square territory with 800 meter sides.

Raiden.

That well-known model had a solid silhouette and thick legs to support it. The bazooka on its right shoulder was known as the Zig-18. The excessively powerful laser cannons on both shoulders were known as the Binary Lotus. It was as much a "robotic robot" as Temjin, but while Temjin had a thin and sporty look, Raiden had heavy armor reminiscent of a baseball catcher or a hockey player. This one had special coloring, giving it a sporty look of primarily light purple.

Odd static slowly ran through the entire robot from top to bottom, like it was a television screen being filmed by a video camera. The customizations were added to the pilot's Virtuaroid. That solidified its image as a piece of data instead of a steel weapon.

Fei-Yen.

This one had been fighting before and it had a slender feminine silhouette with a more obvious custom concept. It was fighting on the same team as Raiden. With a close-range rapier known as Kindness of the Fool and a guided heart-shaped beam, its firepower had no blind spots, but its movements were the most unique aspect. It ran along the ground, kicked off building walls to jump, and flipped through the air in every direction for dynamic three-dimensional movement. It looked like the machine's original agility had been further honed.

The Virtuaroids never seemed too much like robots made of steel, but some seemed more like they were made of light plastic or synthetic fibers. That sports-like impression may have been what led to them wearing what amounted to sportswear and sports protectors. Its coloration was the same purple as the Raiden, but it looked completely different. If anything, it looked like a lightweight cheerleader.

The opposing team was made up of two Angelans with identical colorations.

The Angelans were colored yellow and black like killer bees. They were specialized for long-range combat and they were known as interference machines that applied various forms of jamming on whoever their attacks hit. They should have been poorly suited for a close-range rush, but they forced their way through that with clever strategy.

The motor roared loud enough to hurt one's ears and the giant V-Disc on the back of each Angelan rapidly grew red with heat. The unit was announcing the stress placed on it by this non recommended usage.

The identical two units demonstrated movements not at all possible with the cylinders and gears of existing robotics. They seemed far more human and even had a feminine allure to them. This was also part of the customization. There were multiple types of artificial muscles, but some of them used special fluids. This was likely an application of that.

Simply put, the identical units nimbly crossed paths as they aimed for their targets.

Just like balls being shuffled inside overturned cups, it was impossible to tell which Angelan was which.

The spherical devices overhead that acted as referees began moving rapidly back and forth.

The Raiden's fire-control system (FCS) kept the locking cursor on one of the Angelans, but as it moved from blind spot to blind sport and even cut across the center of its enemy's field of vision, the automatic seeking function could not keep up. If these disturbance tactics had included the aforementioned jamming attacks, the cursor really would have wandered around without knowing where to go.

To sum up…

"Oh, honestly!! Why do you insist on using those cheap movements over and over, Shokuhou!?"

"Kyah, you're so scary, Misaka-san, lol. And Raiden's legs are soooo thick, lol. It's the perfect character for you, lol."

"Ahn!? And quit saying 'lol'!!"

The bright purple Raiden fired bazooka blast after bazooka blast, but the two Angelans flew behind the buildings on either side as if to mock her. If Mikoto pursued one of them, she would have to expose her back to the other.

"Just look at that synchronicity. You've got to be controlling your partner!!"

"Onee-sama! It would be best to ignore your FCS's lock! Firing at them with straightforward manual control should raise your accuracy!!"

"I…know that!!"

The light purple cheerleader Fei-Yen looked down at the buildings from midair and fired down a bombardment of pink particles.

However, none of them hit.

But not because Shokuhou's side was rapidly evading to either side or jumping high into the air.

One of the yellow and black Angelans slipped through the gaps in the glowing rain as it ran toward the transparent wall that signified the edge of the combat area.

“Oh, honestly! It’s going for a pit stop! It might swap out its equipment!!”

The wall blocked the long-range attacks.

“She’s down to the 1 unit, which is good for us! Let’s take care of the remaining one before the other one returns! If we can take the lead in points, we can-…!!”

Before Mikoto could finish speaking, a yellow and black Angelan burst in from the other side of the wall.

“Eh? Aehhh!? It only just left, so why’s it already-…?”

“Onee-sama! That’s a different unit! The endurance has changed, hasn’t it!?”

“Oh, honestly. Are all 4 members of her team colored the same and registered as Hive Eater? That’s just confusing!!”

Mikoto rampaged through Academy City while viewing the usual streets from an unusual height.

In a way, it was like stepping into a different world.

But she got carried away and charged forward with a high-speed dash. She pictured the path as points connected by straight lines and used the strength of her legs as well as the invisible repulsion to launch her unit forward, but an Angelan’s staff stuck horizontally out from behind a building much closer than she had expected.

“Wha-!?”

Mikoto’s Raiden’s legs were swept out from underneath it and it tripped.

An electronic tone sounded.

[District 7 Selection Candidate: Hive Eater has taken 2 points. Current Score: 6-8]

“Oh, hell!! What a cheap trick!!”

“Onee-sama, hurry up and recover!! If you don’t get up within 3 seconds, she’ll get another point!! She’s already won 1 set, so we’ll lose the game if we lose this set too!”

A killer bee colored Angelan repeatedly fired on the fallen Raiden.

And Mikoto did not bother getting up.

“I’ll take my time and let you have this point…”

With no time for that, she held out her bulky arms.

Both shoulders opened up like portable parabolic antennae.

Bluish-white particles danced out.

“So it’s time…you blasted off!!”

Sound vanished.

A massive beam of light swallowed up the killer bee.

That attack was a symbol of high firepower. It was hard to hit with it, but a single hit could turn things around.

Her opponent had not had time to dodge.

The Angelan simply vanished within the light.

But.

“Huh!? That was a direct hit, so why didn’t I get any points!?”

“If I know it’s coming, I can respond appropriately.” The sweet laughter sounded like concentrated honey. “Unlike a certain someone’s thick-legged Raiden, my Angelan is slim, so in a straight-on blast, I can slip into the slight gap between the thick Binary Lotus lasers fired from your shoulders.”

“What!? Curse those refs. Are they even checking the hit-detection data!?”

“Oh, dear. You’re super scary, Misaka-san☆ Just look at that explosion of glaring ability. I bet that’s why the refs don’t like you.”

Mikoto clicked her tongue and the Raiden and Angelan jumped back from each other.

As a Next Generation Game, Virtual-On was not about destroying or killing one’s opponent. It was more like judo or wrestling in that you knocked your opponent down to score points. So even if you tore off your opponent’s head or separated their upper body from their lower body, it would be meaningless if it did not count as a point. On the other hand, a blinding flash of light or a light leg sweep could earn points as long as it unbalanced your opponent and knocked them to the ground.

It was all built on top of that. No matter how much damage you took, you could still win as long as you ultimately had more points. Focusing on the damage and major attacks while ignoring the smaller attacks was a good way to lose in the end.

However.

These young ladies of prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School were not just fighting over the preliminary round for the tournament.

“By the way, Misaka-san, it’s your turn to show off your speech ability in a highly public place! C’mon, I’m not the only representative of the Level 5s at our school!”

“Hell! No! A showoff exhibitionist like you can take care of that!! C’mon, put on a frilly, see-through dress and go curry the favor of all those guests!!”

“Are you even listening!? I’m saying it’s your turn to put on the frilly, see-through dress!! Besides, there’s only one person I want to win over with my charm!!”

“Why does that piss me off so much? It sounds like a threat!”

As they fired at each other from a distance, the light purple cheerleader Fei-Yen tilted her head while viewing the battle from the roof of a tall building.

“Ah!? D-does that mean throwing this battle means I get to see Onee-sama fidgeting bashfully in a frilly, see-through dress?”

“Kurokooo!! I don’t need Shokuhou controlling you too!!”

“Oh, my, my. Do you really think someone as above reproach as me would do that?”

“All the Angelans are moving in the exact same way, so you’re clearly directly controlling all of your team’s pilots. And if you have to control someone to get a partner, does that mean the queen of the largest clique doesn’t actually have any real friends?”

“Oh, dear. Misaka-san, you do realize that theory doesn’t hold much persuasion ability when it comes from our great lone wolf of an ace, don’t you?”

“…”

“…”

After a short silence, the two of them reacted to the other’s provocation by rushing in for a direct clash.

Part 3

Kamijou Touma was trapped by an odd pressure.

The space itself was like a spindle-shaped cocoon. He could not see any kind of chair, but he definitely felt his back being sucked in toward a chair back. There was no seatbelt either.

The interior was smooth with no decorations.

He saw nothing like a clear window or a hatch.

He apparently controlled the unit with only the portable device in his hands.

However, the plainness was not just a feature of a specific unit such as Temjin or Raiden. It was due to Kamijou being a beginner who had yet to customize it in any way. If he wanted to, he could design it to look like a tank or fighter plane cockpit. Some people might place a

shogi board on the floor or have hand puppets dangling from the ceiling as shortcut keys for pilot assistance. Simply put, the space could be freely redesigned if you put in the effort.

Of course, Kamijou was not that “into it”.

If the portable device alone was enough, there was no better option.

(So…this is Temjin?)

He looked around the cockpit, but it was only for show.

He looked down at the portable device in his hands and saw the unit name displayed on the screen.

(Are you just thrown into one of them without going through a unit selection screen like in a normal fighting game? Oh, no, that isn’t right. I chose a face icon to register my portable device when I first got it, didn’t I? I just never used it after that.)

He sighed.

He leaned against the invisible chair back (Was his physical body feeling this back in the real world?) and then started questioning this.

(But…)

Still sitting in the cockpit, he wiggled his fingers while thinking.

(How does this even work? Can it really control all of my senses just from putting some goggles on my head?)

If he was only viewing an image on the goggles, his senses would not feel separated from his body. It was a weird example for a student of Academy City, but it reminded him of an out-of-body experience.

“Well, that doesn’t matter. As long as it’s fun.”

After all, piloting a giant robot was like a dream come true. Academy City might be able to build something like that using its tech, but a normal high school boy like Kamijou would never be given a chance to pilot one. It was like an unreachable dream. He was still mentally distancing himself from it a bit, but if he could enjoy this, it would be best to go all out.

And.

That round of positive thinking seemed to act as a signal.

Light filled the dark cocoon. His vision expanded in the 180 degrees ahead of him. An image was displayed on the spindle-shaped wall. Except it felt more like the wall had grown transparent.

Controlling weapons on all of the joints sounded like it would be overly complex, but the portable device in his hands was all he needed.

He thought about where his fingers needed to be.

His palms were sucked in toward the device and he felt like he had become a cog in the machine.

(Let's see…what? …Stand, can I stand, wah, I stood up!!)

He checked on the movement of the Virtuaroid's arms and legs and he heard low, heavy sounds from all around. It was more like bundles of thin fibers stretching and contracting than gears and cylinders. They were artificial muscles. …Yes, he vaguely recalled incorporating that from a roadside tree pruning robot when he went outside with Index earlier.

The spherical device that acted as a referee floated at a point in the sky and a square of the city scenery was divided off by glowing walls.

A small window opened on the edge of the building scenery so as not to obstruct his view. It seemed to be a video chat and it displayed a girl's face.

“Yahoo, Username Touma-sama. Lilina-chan has successfully booted up. You’d neglected

me for soooo long after initial registration that I was getting really sick of sleep mode."

"What, what, what is this? A transmission!? I didn't approve that!"

"Oh, dear. Has it been so long that I need to open the help menu? And to be clear, this isn't an external transmission. I'm Lilina-chan, the support AI preinstalled on your portable device. Nice to meet you. I'll also support you in battle."

Index also seemed to be ready.

The Virtuaroid standing a short distance away was…Bal-Bados, he thought. It was a relatively skinny one and, instead of holding weapons with its hands, its arms themselves were cannons. But the lower armor looked something like a skirt and white armor flowed back from the head part, giving the overall silhouette a certain shape.

"It looks like Index. What is that? You can customize them that much?"

"That's one way to enjoy it. Use the Material Analyze function and you can incorporate any material found on Earth. I'll tell you how to do it in good time, but using a plain unit is pretty rare."

He looked at the modified Bal-Bados once more. The primarily white unit was mid-sized when compared to the lightweight Fei-Yen and heavyweight Dordray he had seen on the poster, but that meant it was harder to imagine how it would move. It had cannon muzzles instead of hands, but would it fire from a distance or from point-blank range?

Its motions seemed oddly stiff, but that may had more to do with Index being the pilot than the unit's own abilities. It would not surprise him if she viewed the Virtuaroids as marionettes controlled by strings more than as weapons or machines.

(I guess I'm the same in that sense.)

The Temjin that Kamijou Touma was piloting was also average and thus made it hard to predict what strategy it would take. It was the standard all-around protagonist unit. It felt like the character in a fighting game that could use both projectiles and anti-air techniques and held the default cursor spot on the character selection screen.

Its main weapon in its right hand was…a sword?

"That is Sleipnir, Temjin's primary weapon. It switches modes to match the situation, so it can become a variety of weapons such as a close-range sword called the Blitz Saber or a long-range rifle called the Neutral Launcher."

Lilina quickly did her job.

As Kamijou listened to her explanation, a different transmission arrived.

Needless to say, it was from Index.

"Touma, this is meaningless if you don't take it seriously."

“Isn’t that a little strict for someone who still doesn’t know how anything works? Well, this looks fun, so I might as well try it out.”

With an announcement of “get ready”, his unit was given freedom.

The result was instantaneous.

Part 4

With a gruesome series of violent sounds, Kamijou Touma was beaten to a tearful pulp.

Part 5

“…”

“U-um, Touma? Toumaaa?”

The transmission reached the cocoon-like cockpit just fine, but Kamijou stared into the distance while sitting with his arms around his knees.

“Hey, you’re wasting time. If you’re going to leave the switch on, let’s fight some more.”

“…”

Kamijou remained motionless as if his soul had left him.

But.

“C-c’mon, c’mon. I’ll actually go easy on you this time.”

Those words reignited something inside Kamijou Touma.

His shoulders shook, the soul escaping from his mouth returned to his body, and he spoke in a low voice.

“Lilina, was it?”

“Uhey, hey. What is it, Touma-sama? Can I go back into sleep mode?”

“Can I ask one thing of you?”

It was not enough.

He needed more heat.

So he asked the support AI to perform a certain ritual.

“Call me a los-…”

“You loser!! You’re completely goddamn useless! You just don’t have what it takes. Ahh, ahh. I thought I had escaped that boring sleep mode hell now that you were trying out Virtual-On, but I guess I ended up with a failure of a player. That’s just my luck!!”

Lilina was apparently fairly high-spec.

She carried out her task even more proficiently than asked, so Kamijou felt a boiling heat rising from the pit of his stomach.

“Yes, yes. That’s right…”

“?”

“I can’t excuse this just because it’s a game or for fun. Yeah, I can’t just curl up in a ball after getting the snot kicked out of me!! I don’t know how long it’s been since she started playing and I might have only started 10 minutes ago, but I can’t hold my head high unless I bring some tears to Index’s eyes!!!!!”

“Whoa, you’re really getting into Virtual-On in a negative way. Well, with games you win as long as you enjoy it in the end.”

Kamijou pressed his right thumb against the button.

He approved the rematch against Index.

And after that…

“Lilina.”

“Yeah?”

“Tell me everything I need to know about Virtual-On. What do I need to do to wipe that smug look off of Index’s face!?”

“Heh heh heh. I like the look in your eyes now.”

Lilina smiled wickedly in her window.

The two of them faced the “nemesis” before their eyes.

“The fun of Virtual-On is how you get better the more you lose. So keep at it. I don’t know how long she’s been playing, but let’s keep challenging her the dozens, if not hundreds, of times needed to fill that gap in a short period of time!!”

“Yes, yes. So that’s all it is? I don’t need divine guidance or to pull a legendary sword from a stone? It’s just a matter of experience!? Then let’s do it. I’ll climb up to her level!! Wait there, dammit, and I’ll make you cry while I easily usurp that throne you took so long to reach!!”

Part 6

However.

Kamijou Touma did not have explosive reflexes or kinetic vision, so no amount of resolve would let him defeat Index’s Bal-Bados right away.

He had to learn everything from the ground up, all while being blasted, tripped, and kicked over and over.

What even was Virtual-On?

“In general, it’s something like a serious battle with weapons,” summed up Lilina. “Once one side wins 2 of the 3 sets, the game ends. But unlike a normal fighting game, your primary objective is not wearing down a stamina or armor gauge. Forcibly wearing down your opponent like that will earn you some points, but the victor is determined by whoever has more points from legal blows, much like judo or wrestling. Overall, it’s more like a sport than a fight.”

“Either way, it’s bad to let attacks hit you, right?”

“Of course. If your unit is destroyed, you lose 5 points. And when fighting solo like you, you can’t swap someone else in, so you lose the set right then and there. But as long as you have some endurance to spare, it is possible to intentionally take a hit without letting it knock you down,” remarked Lilina. “The units in Virtual-On come in a number of variations, but they have some set categories. For example, on ground or in air, close-range attacks or long-range attacks, and walking or dashing. All of a unit’s abilities can be seen as a combination of those categories.”

The nun-like Bal-Bados that Index was piloting was staying well away from him. She kept her distance and mainly fired glowing projectiles from the cannons that were her arms.

“Ow!! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!! I can’t seem to dodge at all! She keeps hitting me, so I can’t get close!!”

“You can’t exactly expect to dodge when you walk around an open area without dashing. When the enemy fires, move quickly! And not just in one direction! Cut back and forth so they can’t predict your movement!! She’s locked onto you, so she can just tap the button to hit you as much as she wants!!”

He operated the portable device's sticks and buttons as told, but he still could not dodge very well. He was hit over and over until he was knocked to the ground and lost points for going down. His unit's endurance was also worn down, so the unit itself was destroyed before long. He lost in no time at all.

He continued to the next set, but it too ended before he could accomplish much of anything.

"Yeahhh…"

"Can I get more than 'yeah'?"

"As I said, the sets are determined by points and the game ends after one side wins 2 out of 3, but if all the units on a team are destroyed, the set ends without calculating the points."

"…"

"No matter how much your endurance gets worn down, the final calculation begins if you survive 90 seconds. Once there, the points are what matters. But that's going to be difficult at your skill level, Touma-sama. Even if you try to stretch it out, you'll just get a ton of points taken in the next set and lose the normal way."

He had been utterly defeated.

And a thought occurred to Kamijou.

"Maybe the problem is with Temjin?"

"That's quite possibly the worst comment you could have made. It has rookie written all over it."

"Maybe I could try another one."

He returned to the unit selection screen. When he placed the cursor on one, Lilina pulled the information from the official website and displayed it for him.

Some of them specialized in standard weapons like missiles or beams while others used more twisted methods like psychological attacks.

"Oh, some of these look a lot lighter! Fei-Yen…I'm a little hesitant to choose that one. But how about this Cypher one!? It's pointy like a jet!! It looks fast and strong and its knees jut out! It's like a main character!!"

"Well, if that's what you want. And Fei-Yen is a perfectly good unit. But I wouldn't recommend it when you don't know how to dash or jump."

"Gnyahh!!"

He was pummeled soon after beginning.

He was easily destroyed before the points could even begin to matter.

Lilina gave up on her real-time voice support and gave an exasperated comment.

“Y’know, the light and fast units generally have thin armor that allow damage through more easily and they go down a lot easier. You can’t make use of their advantages when you can’t dodge properly, so you might as well be an animal rolling over to show its belly.”

“Then I’ll go with a tough one that can take a beating! Aogami mentioned one called Dordray! I’ll try that one out!!”

“Ahh, well, if you want.”

He was exposed to a downpour of long-range fire before he could even begin moving around.

He was not destroyed this time thanks to the high defensive power, but for the entire 2 sets, he was either knocked down or unable to move as he was knocked back. Of course, that meant he had more and more points stolen and he had no chance of winning. No chance at all.

“Doesn’t she realize this is supposed to be a game!?”

“The units with thick armor are generally heavy and have difficulty moving. And trying to find an easy way out is the wrong way to go about this! Even that extraordinarily large boss Jaguarandi has a weak point. No Virtuaroid is a safe zone that ruins that balance!!”

“Uuh…”

“Don’t give me that. Every unit has its pros and cons, so part of your strategy can be using a Virtuaroid well-suited for taking on Bal-Bados. You’re playing 1-on-1 here, but in a 2-on-2 game, you can swap out with your partner to have a better match for your opponent. But you need to learn the basics before doing that! You can’t exactly pull your weight on a team if all you do is trip them up.”

He ended up returning to Temjin and practicing over and over. He was still only dodging some and getting hit some, so his frustration continued.

“If you like, I can show you the training command log.”

“All I see are rows of arrows and colorful circles and I have no idea what any of it means.”

“Touma-sama, all you have to do is input the given sequence with the buttons and sticks!”

“Some of them are inside red or blue frames.”

“I said Virtual-On is a game of points, right? The moves that will work in your favor are colored blue and the ones that will work against you are colored red. More importantly, you need to hurry! Dodge, dodge!”

But as he was hit more and more, something unexpected saved him.

He just so happened to move behind one of the city's many buildings.

"Huh? Did I just cheat???"

"It's fine. Using obstacles is one of the most basic techniques. But then we have to rely on the cursor for the opponent's location, so there's a chance that they'll move closer, circle around the obstacle, and hit you with a major attack. And explosive weapons can be dropped beyond a wall to damage you. There's no such thing as a perfect save zone, so I recommend you keep your guard up even after moving behind cover."

Kamijou could not dodge well, so he always felt like he was gradually losing in a direct firefight. That was why he moved from building to building in order to challenge Index's customized Bal-Bados at close range.

However…

"If you're going to get close, you need to hurry it up."

"Eh? Why? I'm sick of getting hit by all those projectiles, so isn't it better to observe things from here?"

"You can't just stand around. In fact…ah! Oh, no!!"

Some text appeared on the edge of the screen: Negative Alert.

"If you sneak around and don't do much fighting, you'll be docked a point as punishment! So we'll lose even if you aren't hit!! This rule keeps things fair because the winning side has to keep fighting."

"What? But it's working against me and I'm on the losing side here!"

"In pure points, yes. But what about unit endurance? What about position? What about remaining ammo or accuracy? Look at it holistically and it's possible to see you as the one with an advantage."

"Oh, come on…"

"Besides, the default length of each set is 90 seconds. If the losing side has their points taken, they can have the set stolen from them!!"

"Ah, what a pain!!"

He put up a frantic struggle, but he could not change his tactics and charged forward. He kept the high-speed dash going to quickly move toward Index's Bal-Bados from behind cover. In addition to his legs, he was supported by…a tailwind? No, it was the invisible repulsion. With the assistance of that power, he felt like a flying arrow or bullet.

However.

Partway there, Kamijou's Temjin slowed down. The support of the repulsion gave out and he

returned to his slow “normal movement”.

“Wha- huh!? What happened!?”

“A single dash using the turbo only takes you so far!”

“Come ooooon!”

He grabbed the small device in his hands once more and kept tapping the turbo button for the dash.

“Why! Can’t! I! Move! Forward! At! All!? I just keep pitching forward worse than before!! Am I stalling out!?”

“You moron!! If you hit the turbo again while dashing, it cancels the dash! You’re interfering with your own dash! The dash is supposed to take you a set distance in a single direction and the cancel gives you freedom of motion mid-dash, but you’re just tripping yourself up!”

Meanwhile, glowing projectiles flew in from distant Bal-Bados.

Kamijou focused on the turbo and sticks to dash sideways toward a building wall, move forward at full speed, and dodge the best he could.

“Dashing in Virtual-On is best pictured as points connected by straight lines. The distance you can move with each dash is set, but you can also cancel it partway like you were doing. Moving between points might sound inconvenient, but you can move quite smoothly if you use right angles and zigzagging paths properly. And it doesn’t really wear down your gauge, so you can use it all you want to confuse your opponent.”

He did not have time to stop and listen. The match was underway and the glowing projectiles were targeting him. Kamijou continued using the dashes and tried to approach Bal-Bados while scattering his own projectiles.

“Not good! Ohh, not good, not good, not good! Ahhh!!”

“What is it now!?”

Before he could even finish asking his question, he heard what sounded like a game show buzzer. He looked over and realized the sword-like weapon had stopped firing beams of light.

“Eh? Eh? Did it break!?”

“There are generally 3 different types of attack: right, left, and center. Each of them has its own gauge. Fire too much and you have to wait for it to recover or reload and you’ll be defenseless. Firing from a distance to deter your opponent isn’t a bad idea, but you’re wasting your ammo if you don’t lock onto them! Touma-sama, you’re not using an area of effect attack that produces an explosive blast!!”

“3? There’s only 3 in all!?”

“Well, they change depending on a variety of factors: long-range, short-range, while pressing the turbo button, while jumping, while crouching, etc. And they each have their own unique traits such as long-range attacks being unblockable and close-range attacks not having a gauge.”

“How the hell do I crouch!? When I push the sticks down, all I do is back up!!”

“I’ll teach you how later!! Oh honestly! You used up both your right and left hand attacks already…”

Kamijou’s Temjin wanted to challenge Index’s Bal-Bados to a close-range fight, but if he stopped attacking, it gave her more freedom.

So…

“Huh? Where’d Index go!?”

“If the FCS cursor disappears, it means she isn’t in your field of vision. Focus on the arrow pointing up, down, left, or right! This one’s up!!”

Index’s Bal-Bados had all of a sudden ended up on a building roof and she aimed her arm cannons at him while peering down at him.

He wanted to flee, but he was stuck between buildings in front of and behind him and he could not dash even if he pressed the turbo button. Or rather, he would end up running toward the wall.

“Gyawah!!”

“Long-range attacks are unblockable! There are only 3 options: dodge it with your speed, hide behind cover, or attack to stop her!!”

Even if he could challenge her to a rematch as many times as he wanted, he hated being taken out in such one-sided beatdowns. But he could not dodge the rapid-fire attack when he was in such a cramped place and was still unused to the controls.

“Your left, right, and center long-range attacks are reloading. You’ll have to run away and wait for the gauges to-…”

“Not a chance!! Index is right there!!”

Kamijou’s Temjin jumped straight up. Just like when dashing, he was supported by the invisible turbo repulsion, so the scenery quickly moved around him.

“Double lock. Your weapons have switched over to close-range.”

The colors of the right, left, and center gauges changed. The slowly recovering bars were now brand new.

And the weapon in his right hand changed form.

Kamijou adjusted his grip on the close-range sword named Blitz Saber. A hit from that had to count for a lot.

But just as he prepared to attack, the screen blurred.

Then he shot right past Index's Bal-Bados.

The sudden occurrence confused Kamijou.

"Oh, you automatically lock onto the closest enemy when you jump."

"What for!?"

"It's just how it works☆ And how long are you going to cruise around in the air!? You're too high!! Way too high!! There's nothing to use as a shield in the sky! Keep this up and you'll be the perfect target!!"

"Ahh."

After a horrifically violent-sounding racket from below, Kamijou Touma's Temjin transformed into a firework.

With the unit destroyed, he lost the set.

Kamijou slumped down as the negative results appeared on the screen, so Lilina spoke to him from her window.

"By the way, jumping is crucial, but you can also cancel a jump by hitting the jump button again. That lets you make a short hop. If you just hold down the button the whole time, you'll move pretty slowly and your opponent can hit you pretty easily. That's a basic technique."

"Oh, is that so? I guess I've taken another step toward adulthood…"

"In a 2-on-2 match, you can ask your partner for help when you're in a pinch like that. And you can register up to 4 people on a team, so you can also use a pit stop to swap someone else in. But that can wait until you have a handle on the basics."

He had no reason to give up here.

He was prepared to lose as many times as it took to get stronger.

For the second set, he went on the offensive, lost badly, and requested another rematch.

He heard a deafening sound and his Temjin ended up covered in damage. He fell over, the referee sphere floating overhead judged it as a down, he had a lot of points taken away, and he lost.

But through all that, he gradually came to understand some things.

He had to throw out his pride.

He did not need to stick with just Temjin.

At one point, he requested a rematch while using the same Bal-Bados that Index's unit was based on. But this was not just him feeling jealous and wanting to do the same thing as her.

"I see… She looked so invincible, but this is how the thing moves. It's not all that nimble. And it's good at close-range, but it's got some weird idiosyncrasies."

"You've learned a little more. However they might have been customized, the base Virtuaroids are all publically available, so using the enemy's unit to analyze its pros and cons is one method you can use."

Of course, he could not win.

Index had been playing Bal-Bados all along while he was only trying it out, so he did not stand a chance. He could not get close, he lost plenty of points, and he was defeated without accomplishing anything.

But it was a learning experience.

Bal-Bados was not an unbeatable wall. It could lose depending on how it was used. In other words, it was the same as Temjin. It only looked unbeatable because Index was making use of its strong points and making up for its weak points.

He was still severely disadvantaged, but he caught the faintest glimpse of something.

He returned to Temjin, grabbed the portable device in both hands once more, and spoke.

"Temjin really is an all-around unit. It can fight close-range and long-range. It has fairly tough defenses and it's fairly quick on its feet. It might not outdo Index's exceptional Bal Bados, but it can produce decent results no matter what it does."

"That's right."

"But Bal-Bados is a lot trickier to use. That's why she never approaches me. …If I can do everything fairly well, there's no reason to fight in her field. Temjin has no outstanding specs, but it can also take advantage of the weaknesses of any other unit."

"That's more like it, Touma-sama! It doesn't matter if you have the right answer. What matters is that you think for yourself, predict your own traits, and pilot your unit consistently. Don't just mash the buttons randomly. Have a goal in mind and focus on that throughout. If you do that…"

Bal-Bados moved.

The arm cannons fired, scattering barrage after barrage.

"The Virtuaroid will become an extension of your body."

Kamijou's Temjin used the turbo for a high-speed dash to the side supported by the invisible

repulsion. After dodging the first barrage, he switched to forward movement. After moving in close, he reached a field he had almost never reached before: a close-range battle.

Of course, a rookie like Kamijou could not cleanly dodge every shot.

He still got hit.

But it did not matter. Not as long as the damage he took was less than the damage he did with a single hit from the Blitz Saber. If his powerful attack knocked her over and qualified as a down, he would earn some points and take the lead. Destroying your opponent was just another way of earning points. Virtual-On was about earning points through legal blows instead of wearing down your opponent's stamina. The number of points was more important than the number of hits, so the damage was unimportant if he could win in the end.

That was the fighting style he had chosen.

It was not written in the manual and he was not following any kind of walkthrough.

It may have been awkward and entirely misguided, but Kamijou Touma had still put together this fighting style on his own.

"You begin a dash by pressing the turbo button and pushing the stick in one direction, but if you bring the stick back to its neutral position and push it in another direction, you can change direction in the middle of a dash. That's known as a vertical turn, but if you incorporate it into your movements, you can easily avoid the attacks your opponent fires along the predicted points of your path."

"Oh, oh. Like this?"

"You can break free of a lock by moving out of your opponent's field of vision. So the closer you get, the more easily you can break free by circling around Bal-Bados. The time it takes her to reestablish a lock will create a defenseless lag. That's your chance to move in and attack!!"

They were now nearly at point-blank range.

Temjin and the customized Bal-Bados glared at each other for a moment.

Index seemed to be saying she would move to block Kamijou's Temjin if he tried to circle around to either side. And then she would hit him with a cross-counter to score a down and steal his points.

But Kamijou did not cut to the right or left.

He went up.

He continued the momentum of the high-speed dash with a jump right in front of Index.

He tapped the button twice.

Instead of jumping high into the sky, he passed just barely over Bal-Bados.

This was known as a jump cancel.

“Well done. Virtuaroids don’t handle attacks from directly above very well. Due to the way the FCS works, the cursor indicating the enemy unit’s location prioritizes the horizontal directions of front, back, left, and right, so it takes a second to display when an opponent pass straight overhead!”

He landed right behind Index who was still facing forward.

Temjin and Bal-Bados stood back to back.

He tightly gripped the Blitz Saber.

And he spun around.

The two Virtuaroids swept their close-range weapons toward each other as they turned around.

Temjin used a plain close-range sword wrapped in light.

Bal-Bados used a fork-like thing with multiple pointed optical weapons rotating quickly.

Both weapons had their pros and cons, but Temjin had the greater close-range attack specs.

A high-pitched metallic sound rang out.

Something spun through the air. It was the customized Bal-Bados’s right arm. The arm itself was a cannon and it was supposedly intercepting Kamjiou’s attack with a close-range optical weapon.

It had been severed.

“I did-…”

“Not yet!!”

Lilina shouted back as the rotating right arm came to a stop in midair. The same repulsion used to control the units seemed to pin it in midair and it floated there with definite human intent behind it. Then the cannon arm resumed targeting Kamijou’s Temjin from the optimal range.

“!!”

He immediately moved back to put distance between him and Bal-Bados.

Rapid-fire attacks stabbed down into the ground and were deflected by what looked like compression artifacts. The two Virtuaroids moved apart as Kamijou was forced to abandon the close-range he had finally achieved.

When he looked back, he saw the nun-like customized Bal-Bados's remaining left arm detach at the elbow and float up into the air.

"I forgot to mention this." Lilina gave a belated report. "Bal-Bados's greatest selling point is its ability to detach its body parts, control them independently, surround its enemy, and simultaneously attack from multiple lines of fire. The arms are known as ERLs, or Ejectable Remote Launchers. As that name suggests, the battle truly begins once both arms have been detached."

"…"

Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

But as Kamijou slowly exhaled, there was a fierce smile on his lips.

"In other words, Index is finally starting to sweat. Good, good. I've taken away her ability to look down on me. I finally feel like we're standing on the same field. And you know what that means?"

"Eh heh heh…"

"I've finally got a real shot at winning."

"Ah ha ha ha ha!! Are those the words of a rookie who only started Virtual-On today!? Where did you learn to enjoy combat like this!?"

The battle was underway.

Temjin and Bal-Bados ran through the streets at tremendous speed.

Part 7

He ended up losing that set too.

He fought 7 or 8 more 3-set games after that.

His losing streak continued, but none of them were wasted. He learned to move his unit as he fired, to shift from a dash into a jump, and when to cancel both of those to intentionally throw out his speed and height. If he came up with his own objective or task and focused on "learning", an idea always came to him. The button layout had initially seemed unintuitive and it had slowed him down, but he could feel himself starting to control the Virtuaroid more on instinct now.

Even so, Index was on another level.

She did not limit herself to a single strategy. Each set, she would weave together a different pattern of the various options available to her: midair attacks, ground attacks, horizontal movement, wavelike movement, sticking close, sniping from a distance, etc. That hinted at the great variety of situations she had experienced. She had played this game a lot. And her perfect memory may have been helping out too.

The end arrived suddenly.

Kamijou pushed the ultra-thin goggles up from his eyes.

“Stop, stop!! Ugh, I can’t go on. There’s a prickling in my temples… I don’t think this is 3D motion sickness, but let me take a break…”

“Ehhh!? But I haven’t tried out my special whipped milk cream yet!!”

“How am I supposed to know what command that is when name it something like that!?”

The two of them were causing a scene, but no one paid them any attention.

There were a lot of boys and girls using portable devices around the center. Coming all the way here yet not going inside may have been an issue of style. Or perhaps they had felt an urge to play once they saw the preliminary matches on the screens.

When they put on the goggles and operated their portable devices, something like a ring of pale light appeared over their head. It resembled a hula hoop and it moved down from their head to their feet before vanishing.

(I couldn’t tell with the goggles on, but did those appear with us too?)

“Index, do you know what that is?”

“No, but it seems to be scanning their body in some way.”

“???”

He was a little curious about that, but it was not worth thinking about it too much.

Besides, Kamijou’s goal was to refill his portable device’s electronic credits. The Next Generation Game of Virtual-On was listed as F2P. Kamijou did not really know what that stood for, but it apparently meant he did not have to pay anything to play the game. But the device could be used for almost anything and some of those things required money. In Kamijou’s case, that meant when he was riding the train or subscribing to a recipe magazine.

“I’m going to take a break by running my errand, but I’ll play some more once I get back.”

“Mhh. Then I’ll find a free challenger around here. Even during the tournament, they can’t all be registered for the preliminary battles and there are a lot of spectator players in front of the center. If I send them a message saying I want to see how my portable device is doing, most anyone will play a few rounds.”

After watching Kamijou wave and duck inside the center, Index puffed out her cheeks a little.

(There's no point if I can't show off to Touma…)

The calico cat on her head uttered a leisurely meow.

That said, there was something she wanted to try out, so she sent out a portable device transmission.

She let it search for an opponent.

With a light beep, the first result appeared.

"Hm?'

Index tilted her head at the name given.

It was not written in fancy German and it was not full of unusual kanji.

In fact, the name field was entirely corrupted.

"Who is that…?"

It may have been that Index was just fundamentally bad with machines. It may have been that her curiosity won out over her unease and so she reached for it without worry.

Normally, no one would have hit the accept button.

But Index took that step forward with her head still tilted.

And.

That girl's world immediately changed.

Part 8

If he loaded a whole bunch of credits at once, he would end up buying all sorts of useless apps and ebooks, so Kamijou only purchased 1000 yen's worth. Afterwards, he realized the atmosphere inside the center had changed.

"?"

He felt a prickling on the back of his neck. It was a hostile aura, like an uninvited guest had marched right on in.

The center had a monitor large enough for a movie theater and it was divided into several

small screens. The matches being played near the facility were being relayed there at random. Simply put, it was set up so people could do Let's Plays if they wanted to. And based on the corporate logos dancing in the corners of some screens, the ones that stood out the most could even get advertisers.

When he looked closer, he realized everyone's eyes were fixed on one screen in particular.

That seemed to be the source of the hostility.

Kamijou was the only person confused by this reaction and Aogami Pierce called out to him.

"This is bad. Real bad."

"What is it, Aogami?"

"What is it? One of the Defected players is here. Man, and normally…well, I'm not sure anything about them is normal. But regardless, the Defected players generally 'disappear' so they can't be traced or tracked, but this one's making an appearance right in front of the center! They've got guts!!"

A Defected portable device.

For greater freedom and access to more services, those devices had their safety regulations removed. Accessing functions that should have already been there was one thing, but Kamijou felt no desire to go out of his way to step into dangerous territory.

Aogami Pierce used his thumb to point at the giant LCD monitor in the back of the center.

"Look at that blue Cypher. It's a textbook example of someone who wants to stand out."

The Virtuaroid moving about on the screen was very thin and angular. Sharp points that were not quite wings and not quite horns jutted out from far more than just its back and shoulders. The model looked like it would be very fast. And that lightweight and high-speed impression was overturned by the brutal-looking close-range sword that was longer than the Virtuaroid was tall.

It was colored blue with yellow borders. That too was not normal.

"The username is corrupted, but people are calling them the Blue Stalker. I feel bad for the Bal-Bados fighting them. Everyone was having so much fun with the tournament, but this person has to ruin it all. Oh, damn. The ref spheres are completely ignoring it. What kind of magic trick is this?"

"Wait a second…"

"Yeah, if the Blue Stalker removed their anti-tracking stealth and showed up at the center, they probably expected to show up on the screen here. Do they enjoy beating up their opponent while cheating like crazy?"

"No, not that. Did you say Bal-Bados?"

Kamijou shifted his focus from the mystery Cypher to its opponent.

It was a white Virtuaroid.

Instead of holding its weapons, its arms could detach as mobile cannons.

Due to the great customization, the Bal-Bados's additional armor gave it a nun-like silhouette.

Kamijou's Temjin had faced this opponent not long before.

"Hold on. Isn't that Index!?"

"Well, that ain't good! That ain't good at all! We need to stop her Defected opponent's Virtual-On!!"

"What, Aogami?"

Kamijou could not keep up with his friend's panic.

It was true Index's Bal-Bados was fighting an illegal Defected player. It might have included abnormal data to tamper with its own movement speed and attack power.

But this was only a game.

This was not a shootout between tanks and it was not two fighters struggling to get on each other's tail. Even if she took a direct hit, even if she was enveloped in explosive flames, and even if her endurance was worn down to 0 and her unit was destroyed, it would only affect her points. Index herself would be fine.

Or so Kamijou thought until an unpleasant sensation ran down his spine.

He altered his thinking.

"No…is that part of it too? If she loses, do her device's administrative privileges get taken so her opponent can hijack it!?"

"In a way, it's even worse." Aogami Pierce sighed. "I dunno how reliable this information is, but there're rumors that some of the players involved with Defected players have shown certain symptoms."

"Symp…toms…?"

"Loss of muscular strength, loss of autonomic nerve control, loss of consciousness… I could list plenty more. I don't know how much of it is true, but where's there's smoke there's fire. It would be best to stop this!"

That was all Kamijou needed to hear.

He and Aogami immediately made a mad dash for the center's exit.

Once outside, the battle on the screen exploded within the actual scene around them. The

Bal-Bados had detached both arms and sent them floating around. The blue Cypher was kicking off the walls, flipping through the air, and otherwise making quick dashes and jumps using its repulsion. It would swing its giant sword around to shift its center of gravity to assist its irregular acrobatics.

It was a one-sided battle.

Index had tossed Kamijou around like a rag doll, but she was helpless against the blue Cypher known as the Blue Stalker.

She was just barely avoiding an immediate defeat, but that forced her to focus entirely on dodging. However…

“Not good. She’s got no chance at this rate. She’s basically running straight toward a dead end.”

“Why? Look at all the crazy movements her enemy’s using. I would’ve been taken out right away, so she’s doing pretty good!”

“But there’s a time limit. If she keeps losing points and having her endurance worn down, she’ll have nothing to show for her performance when the time runs out. And then she’s done for.”

There were two ways to win in the Next Generation Game Virtual-On.

One was to take away as many of your opponent’s points as you could during the game.

The other was to destroy all of the opposing team’s units.

In a 1-on-1 battle, destroying your opponent was enough to end the battle. And Index was at a disadvantage in both those ways. Simply dodging would not allow her to turn things around, but if she changed tack and charged in, she would be killed instantly.

Meaning…

“She’s going to lose like this.” Aogami Pierce had a bitter look on his face. “Cypher can transform, so it switches between its humanoid Virtuaroid form and its airplane Motor Slasher form. Everyone uses it differently, but it’s weird not to use it at all. It’s like they’ve placed a restriction on themselves.”

“You mean they’re actually holding back…?”

Kamijou was watching from the sidelines and even he had to stay focused or lose sight of its ever-changing movements, and yet that was not all it could do?

“No, that’s not the issue here. Hey, Index, accept whatever penalty it gives you! Just cut the connection!! That guy’s one of those Defected…”

Kamijou trailed off.

Index was definitely there. Nothing had changed from when he left her. She was on the edge of the sidewalk to stay out of people's way and she looked down at the portable device as her fingers moved.

But there was no light in her eyes.

Her fingers moved at blinding speed like they were independent creatures.

"Hey, Index…"

Finding this odd, Kamijou called out to her and shook her by the shoulders, but there was no response.

Her head wobbled on her neck, so was she even looking at the screen?

"Excuse me a moment."

Aogami Pierce circled behind Index and suddenly placed a large bag over her head and the cat sitting on it.

"What are you doing, Aogami!?"

"Look! Her fingers are still moving even with her eyes covered and the Bal-Bados over there is moving just the same! How does this even work!?"

"You're kidding, right?"

What was going on?

Was it due to the connection to a Defected portable device?

The situation was truly abnormal.

And how bad were the penalties for losing that Aogami Pierce had mentioned?

"Aogami."

"What is it, Kami-yan? Should we take away her device? If that Bal-Bados keeps moving even then, I'll just give up on trying to understand this."

"No, I'll save Index a different way. Virtual-On is more than just 1-on-1, right? I can join in as part of her team, right?"

"Yeah! So that's what you're gonna do?"

"I'm going in."

Kamijou removed the ultra-thin goggles from the bottom of his portable device.

Kamijou's skill could not reach Index's level, so he would not stand a chance in a straight battle against the Blue Stalker.

But he did not have to fight a straight battle.

He only had to help drive the enemy back even if it was 2 against 1.

In the Next Generation Game Virtual-On, teams could have up to 4 people. Those spots were not filled, so he could join in. If all 4 spots were filled and one of them was destroyed, that did not open up the spot and the official tournament only allowed the registered members, but neither of those situations applied here.

That meant he could do it.

He could save Index.

“If this doesn’t work, you start trying everything you can think of.”

Part 9

The result could not have been more obvious.

Part 10

“…Kh.”

Kamijou Touma groaned inside the spindle-shaped cocoon-like cockpit.

He did not understand what had happened.

He had honestly never planned to win the first set. He had only wanted to get used to the Blue Stalker’s movements. But he had been naïve. The first set had ended before he could even figure anything out and the second set was not going much better even with Index fully recovered.

Their opponent’s movements were not normal.

He did not have time to even think about coordinating with Index. His eyes could not keep up with what was happening and a piercing headache passed from right to left behind his eyes. Perhaps because his break had been cut short, simply moving his eyeballs made him feel nauseous.

He heard something like an unpleasantly high-pitched motor behind him. The V-Disc on the

back of the unit was probably ominously glowing with heat.

Kamijou had incorporated artificial muscles into his Virtuaroid, so he was always surrounded by the sound of those fibrous bundles expanding and contracting as he fought, but now they sounded like they were about to snap.

Kamijou clenched his teeth as the referee sphere floated in the sky above.

(They're on an entirely different level…)

Kamijou was "controlling" the Virtuaroid using the movements of his fingers and hands.

But that Blue Stalker was different.

They were clearly pouring their own willpower into the unit.

It was like the difference between a marionette controlled by strings and a possessed doll moving on its own. There were no apparent limits or simplifications in its actions.

(How can they control it like that? Is this the power you get from Defecting?)

Battles between Virtuaroids could not destroy the buildings or roads, so Kamijou's Temjin sat down and leaned against a building.

Meanwhile, the Blue Stalker slowly approached.

And it held that brutal close-range sword that was longer than it was tall.

"…"

The Blue Stalker was not being careless. Even if Kamijou raised his right hand and fired beams from the Neutral Launcher that his primary weapon had become, this opponent was sure to simply vanish from his field of vision. The Blue Stalker could do that. As calm as it looked, it was being appropriately cautious.

"It's locked onto us. Touma-sama, you need to be careful! This is the second set, so you'll lose if you don't recover some points! And it looks like Temjin is going to be destroyed before that anyway!!"

Lilina yelled a warning from the navigation window.

(What do I do…?)

For one thing, he had no idea what happened if he lost to a Defected player.

He had only heard the worrying rumors saying people had suffered loss of muscular strength, loss of autonomic nerve control, loss of consciousness, and more.

How much was a lie and how much was true?

He could not believe it all, but he did not want to test it out with their own bodies either.

(What do I do!? How am I supposed to turn this around now!?)

He had plenty of buttons and sticks in his hands, but he could not see any real options.

He had to do something immediately, but his fingers froze up because he knew anything he did would end badly.

Fear pinned him in place.

He could not escape that close-range sword of death and slaughter.

Given the Blue Stalker's speed, if he simply guarded now, the Blue Stalker would immediately circle behind him and slice his back open. In fact, that unit's movements were odd. It had so much more freedom. It felt like it could easily pull off supposedly impossible actions like a backflip or sliding between another unit's legs.

"Damn…it."

A meaningless sweat built up in his palms.

That horrifically long close-range sword could easily decapitate or bisect a Virtuaroid.

And it rushed in!!

"Goddammiii

It was a right he had abandoned even though it was right before his eyes.

(…I'll do it.)

He felt like he was being tested.

Kamijou focused more on the portable device in his hands than on the positions of Temjin and the blue Cypher.

Was the feeling in his hand real or virtual? He was still unsure.

(If I'm going to overcome this situation and if I'm going to find a way to save Index, I have to try even the most suicidal possibilities!!)

KVV3ST10N 1T.

Kwestion it.

Question it.

A moment later, Kamijou Touma snapped the portable device in half between his hands.

He destroyed his controller.

That was the opposite of what he needed to do if he was trying to win or even just play the game, but it felt somehow allowable in this cramped space.

The various components hung in midair as if gravity did not affect them. The pieces of circuit boards and the LCD display spun while reflecting the light. And an especially tiny black chip was at the center. What had it originally been? A processing circuit, a transmission antenna, or something related to user authorization? Kamijou lacked the technical knowledge to investigate further, but his instincts told him it was the core.

This was the heart that tied it all together.

And the action he took was simple.

He bit it.

The chip was a quarter the size of a stamp, so he placed it below his canine tooth and immediately crushed it between his teeth.

That settled something. It definitively sent him off course.

Everything rapidly rewound in his hands. The weightlessly floating parts gathered back together. Even the damage to the portable device's exterior vanished and light returned to the LCD screen.

It was good as new.

Except, that is, for the black chip.

“_____”

Immediately, Kamijou heard the roaring wind. He reflexively swung his head back like someone had thrown a ball toward his face. Temjin responded to that normal movement by bending backwards, just barely dodging the Blue Stalker’s giant blade as it swung down like a guillotine.

It all happened naturally and Kamijou only caught on after the fact.

(Huh?)

That was not possible. It should not have been possible.

The Virtuaroids were controlled by a lever that only allowed 8 directions of movement, so leaning backwards to dodge a blade was simply not an available option.

(And yet I did it?)

The 8 directions of movement had grown to the true freedom of arrows sticking out in every direction like a hedgehog’s spines.

In other words, he was the same as the Blue Stalker.

He had Defected.

As soon as that term entered Kamijou Touma’s mind, a great tension left him.

His Temjin pushed on the side of the brutal close-range sword as it swung down alongside him. He used his shoulder instead of a weapon. The horizontal vector knocked the blue Cypher a bit off balance, so he made a further attack to its face. Once again, he did not use the close-range Blitz Saber.

He used Temjin’s equivalent of a forehead.

He used a headbutt.

With a dull sound, the Blue Stalker bent backwards.

Kamijou’s attack had reached that ferocious opponent. It had hit.

That was not a fatal blow.

It had only opened a tiny bit of distance between them.

And that was why Temjin adjusted his grip on the Blitz Saber. He gathered all his strength and aimed for the Blue Stalker who had been pushed back to the perfect range for the sword.

A great noise burst out.

But the attack had not hit. The blade had been thrown off course. The Blue Stalker had not set up a mysterious barrier or magnetic field. In the moment of the attack, it had kicked at

Temjin's knee joint.

The diverted blade missed its target and the Blue Stalker jumped back.

"Wait, wait, wait! What is going on? I'm receiving a storm of improper button inputs, so why is the unit reacting!? How is it moving like this? This is more than just a bug or a secret trick. The only way to explain this is that the Next Generation Game Virtual-On includes 2 or 3 times the amount of scripts that I have authorization to see!!"

"Lilina, if you have any questions, search for answers on your own."

"I've found more than 174,000 hits. And the most common keyword found in the results is 'Defected'! This is not good! Of course, some of them are strange banner ads or sites clearly meant to redirect you elsewhere, so it's not exactly the most credible information in the entire world!!"

"Then I don't care. I wasn't the one that made this."

"…Um. Touma-sama?"

The portable device only had colorful buttons and smooth sticks.

Could he really produce these movements with those? How could he move each limb, each finger, and even his head independently like this? Not even he knew the answer.

It all felt backwards. It was less like he was doing things by operating the buttons and more like he was taking the actions in his mind and the commands came to him after the fact. He could display the training command log, but he felt like nothing in there would let him reproduce these movements.

Yet he was doing it somehow.

And if he could do it, then there was no reason to restrain himself.

An explosive noise rang out.

The giant V-Disc on the back of the unit gave a scream as he pushed his movements past the limits. It grew red hot like heated steel. He could not see it himself, but he could tell. The state of the unit reached him the same as his own body's senses.

He did not wait around for his opponent to move.

He was no longer a cowardly turtle. He could be a lion that freely hunted its prey.

They stood alongside each other, glared at each other, and charged forward at the same moment.

Both Temjin and Cypher became roaring wind. The colored winds filled the scenery as they used the asphalt road, building walls, roadside trees, and signs as footing to bounce around almost like pinballs.

More and more deafening sounds burst out. Anyone watching it would have had no idea what was going on. The creation of something only he could understand filled Kamijou with a solitary sense of superiority. His emotions shifted into a zone that made his head spin.

The second set was close to ending.

He had lost far too many points and Temjin's endurance was nearly gone.

There was a serious risk of an instant loss after he and Index were destroyed.

So what?

What did that matter?

They only had the one opponent. There was no one on standby to take that blue Cypher's place during a pit stop. If he destroyed that Blue Stalker, they could ignore the points. Victory would be theirs and they could continue on to the third set. In that 50/50 final battle, one would win and the other would taste dirt.

Kamijou would get back at this opponent.

He would beat them until tears streamed down their face.

"Yes, yes…"

He felt like his thoughts were escaping through his forehead.

Something was being drawn out of him.

The feeling of the portable device in his hands was fading away.

Kamijou Touma was no longer in a state of extreme combat. In fact, he was calm enough to comment on it.

"This is dangerous. This is a dangerous thing to get used to…"

"…"

Lilina started to ask what he meant, but she fell silent instead.

It was unclear if a programmed AI could feel fear or revulsion, but the boy ignored her too. But not because he was too focused on his battle with the Blue Stalker.

He would drag that opponent down from their throne.

He had placed a crude chair next to that throne.

And he had a chance to kick them down.

He focused on the ticket he could use to make it his turn to look down at them.

But that was when it happened.

Temjin and Cypher were moving in a horizontal spiral with their weapons locked together, but as Kamijou watched on, odd sounds came from the Blue Stalker's shoulder and legs.

These sounds and movements were not necessary just to move its limbs like normal.

But hadn't Aogami Pierce mentioned that Cypher could transform and that it was odd not to use that at all? And hadn't he said the Blue Stalker had probably placed a restriction on themselves?

They had shaken free of their own decision. They had cast it aside.

The battle truly began now.

Kamijou's opponent lost their humanoid form and transformed into a fighting beast.

They still had a card hidden up their sleeve.

They had kept it hidden for their own enjoyment.

And so Kamijou spoke.

"That's dangerous, you know?"

His voice was cold and mechanical. His eyes were as emotionless as an insect's.

As if his soul were being influenced by some unknown factor.

Part 11

And.

A white and black Specineff stood on a building rooftop a short distance away.

Despite its thick limbs and wings, this bizarre Virtuaroid's torso was made entirely from thin spine-like parts. It looked more demonic than industrial.

That grim reaper carried a scythe named Ifleesa.

Plus, it had been customized so many times that its body parts pulsated eerily in a way simple armor panels never could. It was almost like something could burst from within at any moment.

"Honestly," spat out the pilot. "The trouble that guy puts me through."

Part 12

Something charged in like a flash of light.

This was not a cannon blast fired from a blind spot. A Virtuaroid itself butted in from outside the combat zone. It had simply moved so quickly that it had looked like a single line of light.

The Cypher named Blue Stalker flew backwards.

But it had not been hit.

The Blue Stalker had taken purposeful evasive action.

Having missed its target, the demonically white and black Specineff slid along the asphalt to slam on the brakes.

And it spoke.

“Choose: leave now, or fight to the end. Either one’s fine with me.”

“…”

“You’re the source of the Defections. You might have more pure experience than me.” Specineff pulled a claw-like finger forward. “But the demon containing Academy City’s #1 is more than you can handle.”

“…”

The movement was swift.

The Blue Stalker declared its surrender and the invisible walls demarcating the field were removed. Even so, the blue Cypher remained there. With a series of solid sounds, its humanoid form transformed into an angular fighter jet.

And it flew away.

The unit itself grew as streamlined as a laser beam that shredded everything it came into contact with.

“What just happened?” muttered the Temjin. “Was I just saved? But why? And what was that just now?”

He turned toward the Specineff in search of an answer, but the demon did not provide one.

“This will begin in earnest soon.”

“What will begin…?”

“You’ll know all too well soon enough.”

The Specineff jumped high into the air.

It landed on a building rooftop and then hopped rapidly from building to building.

Kamijou Touma recalled what that white and black Specineff said just before leaving.

“Because you’re one of us now… Because you have a Defected portable device.”

Between the Lines 1

The composition of the atmosphere and the gravitational values are almost identical.

In fact, even the periodic table of elements is exactly the same. I was surprised to find no Earth Crystal readings, but that must have been just one of many “paths”.

This universe expands infinitely without being poisoned by the ever-growing plants or the Limited Wars. If you turn a blind eye to the slight debris here, it actually looks brilliantly innocent. It feels like people can still dream here and like you could count the stars if you peered through a telescope. It makes me feel guilty, like I’m standing before a defenseless girl who is oblivious to the danger she is in.

The biggest surprise was the unexpected form of the Plajiner bud here.

It will likely take some effort to fold it up into the proper form, but this is also a lot of fun. It would seem my soul is that of a scientist, not of a soldier.

It delights me to find a difficult problem standing in my way. The greatest tragedy is the extinction of possibility, as if you could search the endlessly vast deserts of Mars and never find even a single speck of gold dust. And you could say that perfectly describes the life I had lived.

My many comrades and I were not chosen by the Tangram.

But there is a way to make use of not being chosen.

Look down on us if you like, chosen one. Until the day when we overturn the punishment given to us and pierce that “eye”.

Code Phoenix has safely passed Stage 1.

I will now begin Stage 2 along with my comrades walking down the many other “paths”.

It is all to guide us to the ending in Stage 3.

Chapter 2

Part 1

Misaka Mikoto sat on a bench on an Academy City District 7 building rooftop. She pulled the goggles up from her eyes and began sensing the cheers around her directly.

“Yes! We cleared the preliminaries, so we’re the District 7 representatives now!!”

“Th-that’s amazing. I never thought we would get to stand on that stage…”

Saten Ruiko and Uiharu Kazari were trembling in excitement nearby. They went to the same school, but they were not wearing their sailor uniforms today.

They wore cheerleader-style outfits colored a bright purple.

Needless to say, it was the same coloring seen on Mikoto’s Raiden and Shirai Kuroko’s Fei-Yen.

Which meant…

“Uuh… I just remembered.”

“What’s that bashful fidgeting for!? We’re the representatives! The district’s honor rests on our shoulders!! Hold your head high!!”

Mikoto had been engrossed in her Virtual-On battle a moment before, but she too was wearing a miniskirt. She had felt like she was inside a sealed, cocoon-like cockpit, but how had it looked to the people around her?

“P-pant, pant! Onee-sama’s bare legs are completely defenseless… But I can sense Onee-sama’s unique form of romance in how she keeps them tightly closed even in the middle of battle.”

“I had a feeling this would happen!!”

Mikoto moved her leg to stomp on the face of Shirai Kuroko, the twintail girl crawling on the floor right in front of her.

Saten was still excited and she made a suggestion from next to Mikoto.

“Okay, okay! Let’s go have a victory party for clearing the preliminaries! We need to do

something to celebrate the occasion! The usual family restaurant works, right!?”

“…Let me go change first.”

“You can’t. This uniform is District 7’s trademark now!”

Mikoto sighed.

Shokuhou Misaki, Tokiwadai Middle School’s other Level 5, came to mind. Now, which would do more psychological damage: wearing a dress and giving a speech on stage as a representative of their year, or walking around town in a cheerleader costume on the weekends?

As Mikoto stood up (while grabbing Shirai’s collar for trying to get an even better low-angle look from the floor), her portable device emitted a quiet beep.

In fact, all of their devices did.

Instead of an email or voice call, it was a request for a chat service that allowed a real-time exchange of short messages.

“Furashina: I saw your match. Congratulations on qualifying for the main tournament.”

“Oh! How about we invite Ririn-chan? She’s the one that introduced us to Virtual-On in the first place.”

Saten smiled and made that suggestion, but the response was an apologetic one.

“Furashina: I would love to join you, but I would have a hard time figuring out where anyone is in this crowd.”

“Yeah.”

“I suppose that is true.”

Anywhere near where the Virtuaroids were fighting would get incredibly crowded. It was enough to render the city nearly unrecognizable even to residents like Mikoto and the others. Even if they searched each other out while continuing the chat, there was no guarantee they would find each other. After all, they could easily miss each other even if they were waiting inside the same train station.

“Furashina: I have a terrible sense of direction and I’m no good with crowds, so I’ll enjoy the celebration from here.”

“Eh? Even with your portable device’s navigation?”

“Furashina: The 3D makes me nauseous. I can handle this text chat, but I prefer to avoid using any of the more graphical services for long.”

“If you say so.”

Mikoto did not ask any more questions.

They had tried to meet up a few times before, but they always just missed each other due to crowds near the meet-up spot. Mikoto and the others still needed to return the handkerchief she had dropped.

For that reason, they had only spoken with her online, but she did not seem to know all that much about the latest gadgets. They had first met her when they reached out a helping hand after seeing her having trouble with some light flaming on an SNS.

Overall, she was the small animal type.

She did appear to be attempting a variety of things, but some people needed more distance than others. It was possible this was the most comfortable distance for her.

(She seems a lot more like a proper underclassman than Kuroko.)

It had been a truly lucky find that she had introduced Virtual-On to them.

It was possible even she was surprised.

“Let’s get going, Onee-sama. That fight was quite mentally taxing, so it’s important we eat something sweet and relax.”

“No, no. We’ve got to come together as a team for tomorrow! We need to come up with all sorts of formations!!”

“Ahh… You mean we’re going to ignore the food and dive straight into strategizing mode?”

The 4 girls chatted as they left the rooftop.

They all held portable devices.

They spoke about Virtual-On as something perfectly normal.

Part 2

Once the battle with the Cypher named Blue Stalker ended, Kamijou Touma and Index were released unharmed.

The white and black Specineff was nowhere to be found.

Only after pushing the ultra-thin goggles up onto his forehead did Kamijou remember that he could even do that.

He no longer felt the extreme realism that had seemed to dive deep below his skin.

The portable device he held was unharmed. There was no sign of it having been snapped in half.

He saw the usual scene of District 7 in front of the center.

“Index. That’s right! Index! Are you okay!?”

“Bwoh, mgah!? Wh-what is this!? I can’t see! …Is this a bag!?”

Kamijou suddenly remembered they had done that to her.

Index managed to get her head out of the sack, but the calico cat only stuck its head out and mewed. It seemed to like the enclosed space.

Meanwhile, Aogami Pierce blinked in confusion.

“Kami-yan, how are you feeling? Are you really all right!?”

“Eh? Ah? Well, I feel just fine…”

“I was really shocked when you suddenly disappeared, Kami-yan. I thought you’d been kidnapped by a Teleporter.”

“Disa-…what?”

“You just up and vanished. Want to check the center’s security camera? It was like a magic trick. Do you know what a Ring Scan is?”

“No.”

“When you play Virtual-On, a ring of light appears and scans you from head to toe. Well, you might not be able to tell when you’re playing with the goggles on. I think it’s used to display your body when you move around in the cockpit.”

“Ohh…”

He had seen that in front of the center. He recalled the ring of light that appeared over the heads of the boys and girls as they played Virtual-On.

“So that’s called a Ring Scan?”

“But that only appears once at the start. I’ve never heard of the scan suddenly starting in the middle of a game and I’ve definitely never heard of the player’s body disappearing into it. No, wait…disappearing…a Virtual-On player disappearing… Could it be…?”

Not even Aogami understood what was happening, so his explanation was quite fragmentary.

But he failed to notice Kamijou’s confusion and tilted his head as he continued.

“Right after you disappeared while joining the battle, your Temjin began moving like I’ve

never seen before. But once the game was over, you reappeared like nothing had happened. What was that?”

(A Teleporter? No, my right hand would have negated that, right?)

That second Ring Scan should not have happened.

And if Aogami Pierce was to be believed, Kamijou Touma’s disappearance had happened in the short period between Temjin’s sudden activation and the end of the match.

A certain idea came to mind first.

(It all felt oddly real and I couldn’t quite tell where I really was.)

A chill ran down his spine.

“Did it happen when I smashed the controller – my lifeline – inside the cockpit?)

He still did not know what that had meant or if it had even been the right thing to do. He was even doubtful that simply breaking their portable device would provide other players the same result.

Perhaps it had more to do with throwing out all assumptions.

Perhaps it had more to do with truly believing he could move the way he wanted.

Or something like that.

“Hey, Aogami.”

“Yeah?”

Kamijou just about asked about it, but he held his tongue.

Aogami Pierce had held a negative view of the Defected players. But the puzzled look on his face suggested he had yet to realize that Kamijou had Defected.

(He mentioned something about anti-tracking stealth, didn’t he? Can the center’s monitoring system not tell who’s Defected? Well, I guess they’d just search them out and delete their accounts if they could.)

After thinking through it all, a new question occurred to him.

Yes…

“Index. What about her? Did an unnatural Ring Scan start in the middle of the battle for her too?”

“No, it was only you, Kami-yan.”

“Touma, what are you talking about?”

“It was…only me? Index, did anything happen while you were fighting that Blue Stalker? Um, how should I put this…?”

“No. There were only some times when Bal-Bados’s movements were a little unstable.”

“Unstable?”

“It was like the movements were catching on something. I would move the stick, but it only strained and wouldn’t react like I wanted.”

Was that it?

Kamijou could not say for sure, but had he resisted that odd feeling by taking things a step further and breaking his portable device while Index stayed put and returned to the rules of the Next Generation Game?

Was that the source of the difference?

Kamijou’s physical body had entirely vanished, but Index had simply continued operating her portable device like she was possessed even when her vision was blocked.

But…

(In that case…Aogami might be wrong about the change occurring when you fight a Defected Virtuaroid.)

Kamijou looked down at the device in his hand.

(Does it actually begin when you realize you can do more in that cockpit than just operate the Virtuaroid via the portable device? Well, I had a little help getting there thanks to the Blue Stalker’s unfair movements and that weird corrupted message.)

Question it.

That mysterious message had been sent to his address from his address.

But he seemed to remember something similar happening when reporting on a system error. For example, the automated email sent back when an email could not be delivered. It might have been something happening inside his own device with no connection to the Blue Stalker.

But this was different from an email delivery error.

He had no idea what the portable device had read from him to trigger that message.

“…”

The Next Generation Game Virtual-On was only the tip of the iceberg.

A massive amount of data and scripts were hidden below the surface.

His intuition told him the Defection was not adding anything to the system; it was switching off the security to use the system's full functionality to some end. Yes, what was the purpose of the Ring Scan used on normal players? Index had said it seemed to be scanning their bodies, but Kamijou doubted it influenced how they controlled their units. Could it be nearly useless and the proper Ring Scan was the one that had made Kamijou disappear?

But.

In that case, the Blue Stalker's intent was a mystery. Why did they not keep that secret to themselves? If they wanted to cheat and show off their superiority, it might be best to target people who could not cheat in the same way, but that would ultimately let the secret out and rob them of the very superiority they wanted to show off.

Kamijou doubted they were too stupid to understand that.

In that case, did they have some other goal?

"Whatever the case, I'm glad you drove them off. The center might get fewer visitors if someone like that kept hanging around nearby."

(Oh, then I should probably avoid fighting others from now on. It would hardly be fair now that I've Defected and I want to avoid providing an odd inspiration like the Blue Stalker did for me. It's a shame because this seems like a lot of fun.)

"But is it really over?"

"Who knows, Kami-yan. Your movements were pretty superhuman to keep up with the Blue Stalker, but that blue Cypher never did transform. And it made several miraculous dodges in a row. I bet it was just toying with you. Plus, look at its name. You don't want someone like that following you around everywhere, do you?"

"Ugh…"

"There's no guarantee since a Temjin base might not be able to keep up with a transformed Cypher's hit-and-away tactics, but if you're going to be defenseless otherwise, wouldn't it be a good idea to come up with a self-defense plan?"

"Hmm. You mean like changing my username and selecting a different unit?"

Kamijou tried to do just that, but the unit selection would not accept his alternative choice.

"What's going on there?" asked Aogami Pierce. "Some kind of error? Try rebooting it."

(No, could this be due to Defecting?)

He set that plan aside and tried coming up with something else.

"Instead of that, what if I turn off the wireless…or just switch off the power?"

"That might work, but it'd be pretty inconvenient. These days, you need these things to ride

the train or withdraw money at the ATM, right? I don't know how far you've gotten into using them, Kami-yan, but it seems a lot of people can't calculate change or remember any English vocabulary without them. Y'know, like how people grow reliant on cellphone kanji conversion. The people who are really into it can use them to produce really complex kanji you've never even seen before and foreign languages even more chuuni than German, but take away their portable device and they can barely communicate with another human being."

"I-I can't even think about living without the coupons!! …But that only leaves me one option."

"You've gotta thoroughly customize that plain Temjin, right? Most rookies have barely touched the customization, but that means they have plenty of room to grow."

Part 3

It was the second day of the long weekend.

Part of the reason Kamijou had waited a full day was simply because he had found the Blue Stalker that creepy. He would grow hesitant when he realized he might run into them again while wandering around before he came up with a perfect countermeasure.

But he soon realized something.

For as long as he remained motionless and did not work toward improving his situation, he would remain in danger. He would not grow and he would not become any stronger. The perfect countermeasure was not something someone would just drop in his lap. He had to get moving and accomplish it himself.

So he took action.

The Virtual-On tournament between the representatives of the 23 districts began that day. His portable device kept receiving PR emails and some of the events were introduced on TV.

"This is Nakamura Mary! The long-awaited tournament begins today!! If you don't like crowds, you can stop by one of the viewing bars to enjoy a drink while you watch or you can laze around your home and watch on your portable device! As your Live DJ, I will help connect the footage together, so it might be even more intense than watching it in person. And the more viewers I have, the more advertising money I get, so make sure you watch!!"

"What in the world are you doing, you shill?"

The conversing commentators played in the background like music in a family restaurant as Kamijou took Index out into the city with him.

Posters were plastered across the walls, fireworks burst in the sky on some kind of cue, and stands selling goods lined the streets. There were also a lot selling telescopic lenses made to attach to a portable device. If those things were selling for a fight between giant Virtuaroids, it was easy to imagine how crowded the tournament battleground had to be. While the preliminaries had used a round-robin tournament system, the main tournament used a traditional tournament system. The matches themselves would move quickly, but anyone who was following a specific team or contestant would have to move all over the place, which could not be easy.

Index was entranced by colorful drinks in bottles shaped like Temjin or Fei-Yen, but Kamijou tugged on her hand and kept walking.

“Touma, what are we doing today?”

“Hmm.”

He wanted mobility and stability.

Altogether, that meant speed.

Thick armor and a special move that could turn things around in a single blow were meaningless if he could not keep up with the speed of that world. Plus, Cypher could transform to gain even greater speed and explosive attack power. It would not just stand there and take a rush from a blind spot.

And luckily, Virtuaroids were easily customizable.

No fancy tools or maintenance equipment were necessary.

“You can use the Material Analyze feature. …You’ve probably already forgotten about it, though.”

He had received an explanation from Aogami Pierce and Lilina who would show up on the screen when released from sleep mode.

“Just by holding up your portable device, you can read in the traits and features of any material in the real world and incorporate it into your Virtuaroid. It can be mechanical or biological. For example, you can incorporate the structure of a real weapon or the nature of an insect or other animal. Humans will refer to their surroundings as a mini universe, so your possibilities can grow endlessly if you are creative enough.”

That was apparently how it worked.

The portable device in his hands was all he needed to infinitely expand his Virtuaroid.

“If that’s what I’m doing, where should we go?”

He and Index discussed it as they walked through the streets of District 7 together.

Even now, they could see fluorescent-colored Virtuaroids clashing here and there.

The main tournament did not just have one location, so the matches were held in districts across the city.

The crowds were much larger than during the preliminaries that had ended the day before and the fields for the matches were much fancier. The same technology used to display the units in empty air was used to create something like bluish-white tape to demarcate the field as well as displays for the units' remaining endurance, the remaining time, and what battles were gathering attention at other fields.

They could also hear the commentators' voices, but not from giant speakers. They seemed to be playing from the spectators' portable devices, creating something of an overlapping echo effect.

"Those midair moves really are the best. But maybe they want to gather more viewers because there're adding in some unnecessary and illogical actions."

"Yes, but the viewers will notice that right away. And did they think we were just showing the matches with the highest number of viewers? The world of videos isn't that kind. Videos need ups and downs to keep people's attention! And you're the down! You're just the necessary filler, so don't get cocky! Gwa ha ha ha ha!!"

Kamijou and Index had a hard time weaving through the crowds. The rampaging Virtuaroids were scattering stray bullets all over, getting pushed down, and rolling along the roads, but the students were unconcerned as they cheered and used their portable devices in recording mode. In fact, they grew more excited as they shouted support or jeers.

"Fast, quick, speed… What could I use? An airplane? A rocket? But even if we walked to District 23, I doubt they'd let me near any of those."

While waiting with the crowd for the light to change, he aimed the scanner on the back of his portable device at a red sports car stopped nearby.

It worked differently from a flashlight. A pale ring of light danced along the sports car's surface, but it seemed to work more like a projector.

(Huh…this light. I could swear I've seen it before.)

He thought for a moment and remembered.

It reminded him of the ring scan light that passed over the players' bodies when beginning a match.

A small light flashed and Lilina, who provided navigation and alerts during a game, appeared on the screen.

"Okay, okay! Material Analyze complete. Please give the new data a name and indicate a stored preset. Go!"

"Hmm. Name the data Sports Car Red, create a new preset, and name it Preset A."

“That’s pretty plain.”

“There’s no good reason to give them confusing names. That would just make it harder to find what I want later.”

Temjin, Raiden, and the other Virtuaroids each had their own basic specs.

They could have high speed, powerful close-range attacks, a low jump height, poor brakes, and more.

But the Material Analyze was separate to that.

“How does this work…?”

Simply put, the scanner attached to the device could read the traits and features of a material and incorporate them into your own Virtuaroid. You could make up for a weakness by giving speed to heavily-armored Dordray, or you could further expand a strength by giving even greater firepower to Raiden. The possible combinations were endless and that was one reason why there was never a single best choice of Virtuaroid.

It could be anything from a shortcake to the thick wall surrounding Academy City. Some players had even earned a visit from Anti-Skill by carelessly posting that they had incorporated a Japanese sword or explosives.

“I guess I’ll start by scanning everything that looks fast.”

“Hm?” Like cats and birds?”

“I suppose that’s an option too. I really am from Academy City, aren’t I? All I could think of were machines I’d never get access to like a fighter jet or a rocket engine. Something found closer to home might be more constructive.”

For the time being, he captured the calico cat on Index’s head in the ring of light. …He doubted the yawning kitten would be the trump card needed to defeat that blue Cypher, but the more options, the better.

And where could he find other birds, cats, and dogs?

Partially because he was sick of the crowded sidewalks, Kamijou made a suggestion.

“Oh, I know. Let’s try going to a large park.”

Part 4

“…”

Misaka Mikoto's face was soaked with sweat.

She wore the bright purple cheerleader-style uniform of her team and she had frozen in place.

She slowly inhaled and exhaled.

Her eyes were on her portable device.

(Nothing…)

No matter how she operated the device, the desired display never appeared.

She gently clenched her teeth to drive back the dizziness.

(I keep waiting for a response, but she still hasn't sent anything.)

It felt like having a hole in her chest.

A normal presence by her side was not there.

She could not reach that girl no matter how far she reached out her hand.

At times, she could lose sight of that girl's value and even found her irritating.

And then that blank spot was slowly filled by some disconcerting rumors.

The Defected portable devices.

And the related penalty.

"The official Virtual-On tournament will begin soon. The players who passed the preliminaries should complete the entry process on their portable devices. Please register your unit data and the number of players on your team."

When that businesslike email reached the small device, Mikoto's anguish grew all the greater.

They had qualified for the main tournament as a team. This was supposed to be a day they would look back on fondly. Searching out the concerning rumors might require Defecting her own portable device. But if she did that, she could not use the device in an official match. This would ruin everything.

Misaka Mikoto shut her eyes and pictured each face in turn.

Then she opened her eyes and came to a decision.

She concluded that it was meaningless if any one of them was missing.

She spoke into the portable device.

"Lilina, send an email to the entire team saying I won't take part in the main tournament."

She spoke quickly, regretted it, and forced down that regret.

Defection.

She knew the rumors concerning how to do that.

And she knew the theoretical method for rescuing those who had been “swallowed”. If anyone in Academy City had any sense, people would be doing the same thing elsewhere.

She first had to Defect and contact someone who had started ahead of her. After that, she could come up with the necessary ideas for optimizing and improving the plan and even directly join in if necessary.

Part 5

Parks came in many forms.

They could be a grassy empty lot in the gap between buildings or they could be a vast forested region that provided a home for rare animals. The District 5 nature park that Kamijou and Index arrived at felt a lot like an outdoor event site.

Green surrounded a large manmade lake in the center. An indoor pool and a tennis court were located further out.

It had a jogging course and an outdoor concert stage instead of slides and swings for children, so it felt like it was meant for a slightly older demographic.

“C’mooon! The great Nakamura Mary is here, so get the viewers all fired up with an exciting battle!!”

“So this is what happens to a woman when she gets too full of herself…”

This too seemed to be a stage for the tournament. Not far away, an Apharmd and a Dordray were moving this way and that atop the neatly mowed grass and the manmade lake. Dordray had the exciting look of a giant construction machine, but Apharmd had the same “standard” image as Temjin. It was a little rounded and more humanlike and it used modern weaponry like machineguns and tonfas.

The open space was full of students and families enjoying the long weekend.

Kamijou sighed after taking refuge in a wooded area with a more obstructed view.

He could see the demarcated field with various displays dancing around, but he gave it a wide berth.

Observing the movements of those more experienced players could come in handy, but he was focused on the Material Analyze at the moment.

“There we go. There are plenty of small birds like doves and sparrows. And maybe I can ask someone walking their dog for permission to scan their pet. I might as well scan as many other animals as I can.”

“If you wish to use the Material Analyze feature, please remain within 1 meter of the target object for 10 seconds.”

“Pigeon, sparrow, bird skin, bird meatballs… Drool…”

“Surely you haven’t been adding flavor data to your Bal-Bados…”

No matter how annoyed Kamijou was, Index was still the more experienced Virtual-On player.

“So what exactly have you incorporated into your Bal-Bados?”

“Soda, of course. Mint, of course. Lime, of course. I made it just like the soda mint parfait that tragically doesn’t actually exist…”

“I was afraid of this! So anything other than food!?”

“Hm? Well, I gave it the balance of a balancing toy, the light weight of a paper airplane, and the toughness of a frying pan…but overall I guess I went for speed. Since tricky Bal-Bados’s original movements aren’t all that great.”

“Hmm. So there’s a lot you can do. With that much freedom, I feel like I’ll get lost if I don’t decide on a direction to start with.”

From there, he began his data hunting journey.

The pigeons showed zero – if not negative – caution around humans, so getting one of them was simple. They showed no sign of fleeing even with the bright lights and explosive noise of the clashing Virtuaroids. In fact, he had to be careful lest he accidentally kick one while walking around.

The sparrows proved more difficult. They were sensitive to light and noise and they refused to let him within a meter of them. 2 meters was the limit no matter how hard he tried. After some thought, he left the device on the grass and used string and wire to press the button from a distance.

He also scanned some other things he caught sight of like a grasshopper and a dragonfly. He would be incorporating their traits and structures into his Virtuaroid, so those small bugs could actually be quite useful. He had heard a lot trivia about the strength of spider webs and such.

After scanning a whole bunch of things, Lilina expressed some doubt from the screen.

“Touma-sama, what good is scanning that sign? That seems unnecessary for gathering Material Analyze data.”

“Don’t worry about it. These things can come in handy,” explained Kamijou as he walked away from the sign next to the manmade lake.

The sign was a notification concerning the water level adjustment drainage ditch.

Meanwhile, Index and the cat began to protest while following him around.

“Toumaaa, I’m hungry. It’s already lunchtime.”

“Oh? It’s that late already?”

He was worried about his finances, but he really did not want to head back to the dorm for lunch only to return to this park afterwards.

They ended up visiting the food cart zone that had appeared in a corner of the park’s parking lot through something of an unspoken agreement. The crowds were a bit of an annoyance, but these carts would not have all been there if not for the tournament.

“Lilina, perform a search.”

“Sure thing. Found something on the tournament’s official site. They have a portable device coupon accepted at any of the registered stands or carts.”

That was a relief.

He ignored all the stands selling portable device accessories such as POV cameras attached by the ear, sheet-style wireless keyboards, and drones that could be sent out for simple filming using the screen at one’s fingertips.

He focused on the ones selling food.

He saw the gold standards like ramen and oden, normal options like hot dogs and kebabs, and even dark horse options like skewered deep sea fish and peanut butter curry. Some were trailers lugged around by manpower and others were full-on vans.

“Let’s try them all! Them all!!”

“Not a chance!! You need to decide on one, Index!!”

They looked around and ended up checking out a seafood bowl place that only served rejects. Of course, the “rejects” did not refer to the customers; it referred to the fish the fishermen had thrown out because they would never sell. Since no one ate them, their numbers grew and they tended to wreak havoc on the ecosystem.

Kamijou Touma convinced Index by saying their delicious meal would double as a social service, but his real reason was how super cheap the rejects were when compared to bluefin tuna or sweetfish.

“Mmm! It’s actually really good! But what kind of fish is this tuna-like one!?”

“It’s best not to think about it, Index. The long deep sea fish name wouldn’t mean anything to you anyway and I promise you you’d regret the pictures you found if you searched the name on your portable device!”

Kamijou and Index chowed down while on their feet. The cat was able to eat a special cat bowl that the guy running the cart had prepared for them. Everything not on the menu must have been sold at a bargain price because it was actually more cost-effective than the human lunches.

“Touma, what are we going to do now?”

“It might not be a bad idea to check out the zoo or aquarium, but then again…the Material Analyze might not work right through the glass. Would it just scan the glass? But light and air don’t seem to affect it…”

Because people payed by portable device, there was a wireless router sitting next to the cart’s register.

Kamijou looked over at it while holding his styrofoam bowl.

(A communication device… But I doubt I could move at the speed of light if I incorporated optical fiber. And even if I could, I wouldn’t be able to control it.)

“Ahh, that was yummy. Thanks for the meal.”

“It makes Kamijou-san a little sad you turned away from me and faced the guy at the cart when you said that…”

After they finished their lunch, Kamijou took his and Index’s bowls to a garbage can a short distance away.

(But if that blue Cypher really does show up again, how am I supposed to fight? Fire a long-range barrage to cut off their escape route? Stay close and keep attacking so they don’t have time to transform? The Material Analyze adjustments I choose will change depending on the answer.)

He opened the appropriate menu on his portable device and found 20 to 30 scan data files, from the cat and pigeon to small bugs. But they were essentially ingredients. What would he expand on and what would he throw out? He had a feeling those decisions were what mattered most.

Kamijou Touma had no way of knowing thanks to his amnesia, but the way Lilina spoke to him was like the aquatic mammal that had come with the word processor and spreadsheet software of an older age.

“Is something the matter? I am awaiting further inquiries.”

“It’s nothing.”

(I can just leave the data management to Lilina. I've heard some people do it all manually, though. …Maybe I should study up on all this. But if I go for it without knowing what I'm doing, I'll probably screw it all up.)

He reached the recycling trash can while still deep in thought. Due to the crowds for the tournament, it was about to burst. But Kamijou Touma the House-Husband King had honed his lazy housework skills through life as a student, so that was not enough to bother him. He shoved the styrofoam bowls right on in.

That was when someone spoke to him from the side.

"Mumble, mumble…"

No, they may not have been speaking to him.

But he still turned a curious glance in that direction due to the location.

An impressive pile of garbage bags had formed right next to the trash cans for burnable and non-burnable trash. The clear bags seemed to contain grass clippings and fallen leaves, so they lacked the raw stench of kitchen waste.

Even so, was this any place for a girl to dive on top of the garbage bags and fall asleep?

Her bright hair was halfway between gold and silver, which he thought was called platinum blonde. Her hair was long, but the bangs covered one of her eyes and hid half her face. She was short and her slender body was covered by a blue outfit consisting of a white blouse with a large ribbon on the chest, a miniskirt, and a deep blue vest. Overall, it made her look like a ballerina or a figure skater. Although the pleated skirt was awfully short.

If that was all, he might have simply gasped.

But this girl was brimming with an inhuman beauty that could almost be called fairylike.

But…

"…"

Kamijou covered his face with his hands.

The location could not have been worse. She felt as out of place as a teddy bear floating in a muddy river.

He honestly considered leaving. He even turned around, but then he faced her again.

He knew this was none of his business.

(But why is she sprawled out like that!? And with such a ridiculously short skirt!? Can't you give me just one thing! Just one thing that makes me think she won't be in trouble if I leave her here!?)

People tended not to gather in the trash area, but this was the day of the Virtual-On tournament and there was a thick wall of people not far away. And to make matters worse, someone could appear at any moment and yet it was a gloomy, deserted area.

He did not want to imagine what would happen in a strange collaboration between this defenseless girl and someone who lived a less-than-admirable life.

Once he finally resigned himself to his fate, Kamijou grabbed the shoulder of the girl sleeping peacefully in the pile of garbage bags. If an ally of justice arrived now, this visual would likely earn him a punishment.

"Hey, wake up! Why are you collapsed here!?"

"…Zzz…mumble, mumble?"

She woke up.

Surprisingly, her eyes were ruby red.

And they did not appear to be color contacts.

He could see no concern on her face, so it did not seem that she had fallen victim to an urban legend about having one's organs taken after drinking too much. She looked like she had chosen this bed herself.

Still sprawled out on the garbage bags, the girl blinked her red eyes and spoke to him.

"Y-yawn… What in the world happened…?"

She shook her head, shaking her bangs in the process.

When Kamijou looked down at her face again, a strange sensation ran up his spine.

He recognized her.

“Huh? Lilina…?”

“Fweh?”

“What is it? Do you need something?”

Two voices replied.

He compared the face seen through the portable device and the face on the screen. The two girls looked almost…no, exactly the same.

There were differences in their clothing and coloring, but their appearances were shockingly similar. Confusion briefly fell over Kamijou, but after he chose not to write it off as a coincidence to just give up on thinking, 3 possibilities came to mind:

1. This girl had entered the real world from a portable device.

2. This girl was a cosplayer who had modeled her clothing after Lilina.

3. This girl was the model on which Lilina was based.

(Well, 2 or 3 would be the sensible choices.)

Then the girl said something else.

“Um, are you mistaking me for someone else?”

“What?”

“My name is Ririn. Furashina Ririn. My name is not Lilina…mumble…”

She did not seem all that interested.

It almost sounded like she was answering a wrong number in the middle of the night.

(She doesn’t seem interested in the tournament or Virtual-On either. Does that mean she isn’t a cosplayer?)

That left Possibility 3: This girl was the model on which Lilina was based. But if she was the model, then was she somehow connected to the developer of the Next Generation Game Virtual-On? Virtual-On was quite popular, but there were a lot of mysteries concerning who had made it and when. It felt like running across a living legend.

“Mumble…”

“Wait, wait, wait! Not there! Don’t go to sleep on the pile of trash!! There are plenty of better options! Like a bench!”

“I might not look it, but I’m a celebrity who can’t sleep in a bed with hard springs…”

“Aren’t you just driving up prices through inflation, you celebrity? Anyway, get out of there!!”

He grabbed her arm and tugged, but much to his surprise, she did not budge. Yes, picking up an entirely limp human being took a surprising amount of effort!!

As Kamijou grunted and groaned over the collapsed girl (looking incredibly suspicious as he did so), he spotted a familiar face walk by not far away.

It was Misaka Mikoto of prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School.

For some reason, she was wearing a light purple cheerleader-style outfit. He doubted she would choose to walk around the city dressed like that, so it may have had some connection to the tournament.

Perhaps she was cheering on a friend or competing herself.

Either way, he was glad to see her.

(I-I can't do it on my own. This is perfect timing, so I should just ask for help.)

"Hey, Misak-…"

Just as he gave up and called out to her, something cut off his words.

Furashina Ririn had suddenly tugged on his arm. The unexpected force knocked him off balance and he was invited to the garbage bag bed as if he were lying over the slender girl.

"Wait, you-…mgah!?"

"Be quiet," flatly said Furashina Ririn.

Incidentally, Kamijou had dived face-first into the girl's flat chest while her hands firmly held his head in place, bringing him into a strange new zone.

But then she said more.

"She is dangerous. People like her are known as Hunter Hunters, so you need to be careful…"

"Mgah…what?" asked a puzzled Kamijou.

Was she referring to Mikoto with that unfamiliar term?

"A Hunter is a player who inflates their score by hunting down NPCs. A Hunter Hunter is a player who targets those players. And they are always residents of the Defected mode, just like you."

His heart gave an icy leap in his chest.

How did she know he had Defected? And did that mean Mikoto had Defected too?

If Misaka Mikoto was participating in the tournament, wouldn't that mean she continued to fight despite knowing the danger to those around her?

And if Furashina Ririn was Lilina's model, she would have to be closely connected to Virtual-On's developer.

How much did she know?

Could she provide a useful hint regarding the conflict with the Blue Stalker?

So many questions came to mind that he had difficulty judging the value of each individual one. His mind was near bursting and he did not have time to rank them all by importance.

"Wait, please wait. Can you explain everything from the beginning? Who exactly are you?"

Kamijou tried to get some information from her, but an unexpected interruption stopped him.

"…Touma."

A low – frighteningly low – voice seemed to rise from the depths of hell.

"You were taking so long throwing out the trash that I thought you might have gotten into trouble. I was worried and came to check on you, but this is what I find?"

"Oh, Index-san."

"Why so formal all of a sudden?"

"Please, please. I am trying to have an important discussion at the moment and I would greatly appreciate it if you did not complicate matters. So get lost!!"

"Not only are you attacking a girl on a pile of garbage, but you're acting like a king too!? What is the meaning of this, Toumaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!?"

With that shout, the world was dyed red and black.

Part 6

Some girls' voices could be heard within the crowds.

"Hyah, we've finally made it to the main tournament! I can't believe we're representing District 7!!"

"Auhh… But do we really have to wear these? Why do we have to dress like cheerleaders, Saten-san?"

"It's important, Uiharu! This is a team battle, so we need an obvious sign of our unity!!"

"Unity, huh?"

“Yeah, I am worried about Misaka-san suddenly canceling on us.”

“Well, we know she isn’t the kind of person to ditch this without a good reason, but I can’t help but wonder what happened.”

“Maybe it has something to do with the fact that we can’t seem to contact Shirai-san either. Then again, it might turn out that someone from their school found out and they’ve been confined to their dorm. They do go to a fancy school after all.”

“N-now that I think about it, aren’t we in a lot of trouble? It’s just you and me now, Saten-san, and our opponents will probably have a full team of 4.”

“Not a problem! They’ve been registered as part of our team, so they might arrive late and join in. We just have to trust in our teammates and keep fighting!”

The girls wearing bright purple cheerleader outfits vanished into the crowd.

Part 7

Kamijou Touma knew he had to do something.

The short platinum blonde girl named Furashina Ririn had disappeared without interacting with Kamijou and Index much. She must not have had much interest in other people because she had wandered off without even saying goodbye. He had wanted to run after her, but he had lost sight of her in the crowds.

“Oh, how about you purchase 3…no, 6 of the aerial filming drones from that stand over there and search for her from the sky?” suggested Lilina. “Her distinctive blue clothes and platinum blonde hair should stand out.”

“You fool, don’t underestimate the emptiness of Kamijou-san’s pocketbook.”

“Umm, according to the bank account in Kamijou Touma’s name, your remaining balance is-…”

“I wasn’t asking for an answer! And that’s scary! When did this device get linked to my bank account!? And when it’s connected to the internet!”

“Either way, I’m not sure why you would want to brag about how poor you are.”

So Kamijou assumed that was the end of it.

However…

“…Touma.”

“Yeah.”

After less than 2 minutes of walking around, they spotted Furashina curled up on the park lawn like a cat in the sun.

He shook her shoulders to wake her, but she walked off again. Then they found her sleeping underneath a fish & chips van.

Finally, they ran across her sleeping with her next to a drink vending machine. Her head was sticking inside a wire mesh trash while her miniskirt and small butt were sticking up into the air.

That was when Kamijou Touma realized he truly had to do something about this.

“Cut it out!! What do you hope to accomplish by worrying Kamijou-san’s peace-loving heart!?”

“Nfweh…?”

Furashina Ririn looked his way after he pulled her head from the trash can, but the eye visible past her long bangs looked unfocused and her cheeks were red. And her reactions were incredibly sluggish.

He was certain she was not listening.

Just like the homing instinct of a drunk, she was moving entirely on reflex.

Kamijou scratched at his spiky hair, sighed, and pulled out his portable device. He glanced over at the drink vending machine next to the trash can.

“Okay, fine. Here, I’ll give you some coffee, so drink that to wake up. This is actually weird. Not even a TV station’s AD can sleep like that.”

“Ah, no fair, Touma!! If people accept that lazing around is enough to get a treat, this country’s economy will collapse!!”

“Sounds like your lifestyle in a nutshell to me.”

Due to the crowd, some of the buttons had the “sold out” light active, but the black coffee was still in stock. He pulled out his portable device, held it up to the vending machine, and grabbed the hot can that clunked down to the bottom.

But he was soon stopped.

“Sorry, but I don’t like hot things or bitter things.”

“That’s why it’ll help wake you up.”

“I don’t like what I don’t like.”

“You mean I wasted my money!? Uhh, here, Index! Open your mouth!!”

“A chance to steal it for myself!? …Glug, glug, glug, glug…ahhh, that was refreshing.”

The black coffee effect seemed to make Index’s face look slimmer and more dignified, but he did not have time to focus on that now.

These small expenses were no laughing matter when they piled up, but he bought another one.

(Anything’s fine as long as it’ll wake her up.)

So he chose a carbonated energy drink from the drinks without the “sold out” light active. This one was known for its fairly harsh effects.

“Sorry, but carbonated drinks make me feel bloated and sick. Pass.”

“Index.”

“Gyahavobarhahhh!! I’m brimming with energy!!!!!”

After making sure the drink did not go to waste, Index had something of a punk aura around her, but that was still not Kamijou’s focus.

He could not leave that blonde napping idiot without doing something about her sleepiness.

“Is there anything I can do? I get the feeling she’ll just refuse if I try to feed her something super spicy.”

“The more fundamental problem is that sleeping is my job. Or maybe you could say remaining asleep is my duty.”

“That level of laziness might be the dream of all mankind, but…oh, I know. There are food carts here too. Come here a minute!!”

Furashina Ririn would disappear and fall asleep somewhere if he let her, so he was forced to grab her fairly warm hand as he walked through the park. Index’s spirit had been sent to the world of punk, so she was too busy headbanging to make any of her usual comments.

Kamijou returned to where they had eaten lunch earlier. As he walked around the food trucks gathered in the parking lot, he spotted the perfect one.

“A coffee jelly sundae. Hmm, that should work. …I’m a bit worried about this price that looks inflated for the tournament, though.”

“Coffee is bitt-…”

“It’s almost all syrup and whipped cream!! Can you please meet me halfway here!?”

Kamijou forced the issue and prepared to hold his portable device up to the reader on the counter.

At that very moment, Furashina puffed out her cheeks and narrowed her visible eye while

still looking nearly emotionless.

“In other words, I can avoid the bitterness by keeping that from working.”

“Hm?”

Immediately afterwards, an odd tone sounded from his portable device.

“Wah!”

“What? I’m getting an error too!”

“Is something wrong with the communication base? No, this app doesn’t exchange data.”

He looked around and noticed a small commotion.

The Virtual-On tournament itself seemed to be continuing without issue, but the portable devices in this section of the rest area had all ceased functioning.

“Ahyarawarbrr!? Wh-what is with these packets?”

Lilina’s eyes were spinning on the screen.

Could it be?

“Are you hacking the device with some kind of electric or data esper power!?” he asked the girl.

“I’m not sure what you mean by esper power…”

“N-nyo, Touma-shama, this portable devishe should theoretically be immune to any attack method reliant on the shtandard binary-based von Neumann architecture. It doesh not matter if it comesh from an equation or eshper power.”

“Then what’s going on?”

Kamijou felt shocked anew, but Furashina Ririn did not hold her head high.

In fact, it drooped down.

She was preparing to fall asleep.

“Yawn… That should give me…some time to…”

“Unfortunately for you, Furashina, Kamijou-san keeps a 5000 yen bill hidden in his sock for times like this!”

“_____”

“And if you don’t fix this bizarre problem right this instant, I’ll give up on the coffee jelly sundae and bring you a piping hot hell with the blackest coffee I can find! I’ll pour it down your throat whether you like it or not, so choose wisely!!”

Limp Furashina's red eyes dilated slightly.

That was all.

"Huh?"

"It's back…"

"It scares me that I have no idea what happened."

Everything was back to normal.

Unsure what had happened, Kamijou looked around, but…

"Mumble mumble, zzz…"

"T-Touma. I'm about to be crushed here."

He had to do something about Furashina Ririn, partially because she was leaning all of her weight on Index. To do that, he needed the caffeine of the coffee jelly sundae.

So he ordered one.

As the Kamijou household's finances were driven into even more dire straits, he held up his portable device and purchased the necessary item. The three of them sat at one of the simple tables put together for the food cart customers. They were quite crowded, but they managed to find space to sit. A lot of people had their portable device on the table to watch the matches while they ate. Seeing people watch it on a video site while sitting within the actual battle stage was an odd sight.

"…Sob. This is Nakamura Mary. The next standout card is over here."

"…"

"Here we have the Comet Strikers team that looks like out-of-control trucks after adding skates to ultra-heavyweight Dordray to forcibly give it some mobility. And their opponent is the Killer Trench team that uses Apharmds with the improved disturbance abilities thanks to stabbing their shields into the ground to mass-produce obstacles. I can't wait to see how it turns out! Sob…"

"That's quite the change of heart there. I'm impressed at how depressed it makes you. It really must be frightening to get your sponsor mad at you."

It was time for the coffee jelly sundae.

The spiky-haired boy was unsure of the difference between a parfait and a sundae, but this looked like a wide container with lots of die-shaped pieces of coffee jelly poured in, vanilla ice cream and whipped cream piled on top, coconut syrup dumped over that, and finally a stick-shaped cookie stuck diagonally in. It also looked like a mas of calories that would last someone stranded in the mountains or a desert island until rescue arrived if they ate it bit by

bit. Simply put, it was the enemy of girls everywhere.

“I’ve turned into something of a bad guy for ordering that for her. Well, just eat it. You can tremble in fear once your mind is functioning again. You need to find something to worry about, even if it’s just your weight.”

“Ah, the napping girl has reached the next stage!? Lazing around gets you a veritable house of sweets!?”

“Don’t you recover now! And again, that’s your normal life!!”

“And the napping girl is snoring with her face inside the container.”

“Don’t ruin it like that!!”

Hearing a strange bubbling sound from where Furashina Ririn’s face was submerged in the ice cream, Kamijou quickly grabbed the nape of her neck and lifted her head. He had bought all that coffee jelly to wake her up and yet she was about to use it to give herself eternal slumber.

“C’mon, look this way so I can wipe off your face.”

“Nfhh?”

“This handkerchief sure is getting a lot of whipped cream off. If I tied you to a tree, I bet you’d attract rhinoceros beetles…”

Even if she had a small face, it was still impressive that the sundae was large enough to contain it all. She would have had difficulty finishing it all herself, so they all shared it in a casual family hotpot style.

“Chomp, chomp!! Munch, munch, munch!! Touma, that clump of vanilla there is mine!!”

“This will be entirely useless if you eat it all! And Furashina’s about to fall asleep again since you’re excluding her!!”

The girl seemed to have almost no independence. Or rather, any time not focused on her would be entirely wasted. Kamijou finally grabbed her spoon, scooped up some coffee jelly, and developed a delivery style of culinary culture.

Index grew somewhat irritated as she watched.

“…Touma. I didn’t think I was going to see the old-fashioned ‘say ah’ here.”

“I’m well aware this is a legendary art that had supposedly faded into the mists of time, but there’s no other option here! I have to take one for the team. If I don’t throw out my shame, we’ll be stuck here forever!!”

Finally, he managed to get a bite in her mouth.

Furashina Ririn’s mouth moved like a small animals and then she swallowed.

“Gulp.”

“She swallowed it. Oh, my! This girl just swallowed my coffee jelly, Index-san!!”

“If that’s enough to move you to emotion, then I’m confident I can submerge America in a sea of tears 24/7.”

That said, Index seemed somewhat interested, so she scooped up some coffee jelly in her small spoon and carried it toward Furashina Ririn’s mouth. The girl’s mouth moved on reflex like a drunk’s homing instinct.

The caffeine’s blessing must have reached her after a short delay because life gradually filled her dull eyes.

Her wobbling head suddenly stopped.

“Mh? This isn’t good. My drowsiness is about to vanish entirely.”

“That’s how it’s supposed to work.”

She ignored Kamijou’s comment, rubbed her eyes through her bangs, and then reached upwards to stretch her back. When she leaned back a little, her sensual but undeveloped feminine bodylines showed through her blue vest somewhat. Whether sleepy or wide awake, she seemed to do things at her own pace.

Regardless, it looked like she was not going to fall asleep below a van or with her face in a trash can anymore.

“Mission complete. Finally.”

Kamijou gave into his annoyance and let his legs sprawl out in front of him while sitting in his seat. He also plopped the portable device down on the table. Just like removing a wristwatch or cellphone, it provided an illogical sense of relaxation.

He glanced down at the device.

“I need to do something about this soon. With the Defection and Blue Stalker, the problems keep piling up. What am I even supposed to do?”

“…”

Furashina Ririn’s eyes were drawn toward the portable device too.

After a pause, she asked a question.

“Do you hate that thing?”

“Hmm?”

After a glance over at Index who was consuming the rest of the coffee jelly now that it was not needed to wake up the other girl, Kamijou answered without really thinking.

“I do.”

It was a piercing answer.

Furashina Ririn gasped a bit, but he continued.

“It brings all sorts of extra problems like the Blue Stalker and such. Defection? I don’t care about that. Why would I even want ‘more’? Its only value is in being fun, so I don’t care whether or not it’s useful. But they felt the need to add on that extra stuff.”

“…”

The girl’s eyes moved so slightly no one would have noticed.

It was like she was viewing a dream.

“What is your name? She seems to call you ‘Touma’.”

“Oh, I’m Kamijou Touma. Come to think of it, I bought a giant dessert for someone I hadn’t even introduced myself to.”

“Kamijou Touma-kun. I must remain asleep.”

“?”

Kamijou looked puzzled.

The light blonde girl looked him in the eye using the eye hidden by her bangs.

“I thank you for showing me something that makes me want to wake up despite that.”

Part 8

Kamijou could not remember what had happened, but the next thing he knew, Furashina Ririn was gone. She would apparently appear and wander off randomly whether she was feeling sleepy or not. She had a surprisingly ephemeral presence for how much of an impact she left.

Kamijou was returning the empty coffee jelly sundae container to the food truck. Unlike the styrofoam bowls from before, this was an expensive-looking glass container. He had Index wait for him at the table. Not because he was spoiling her, but because taking her through the food cart zone would only increase their expenses.

And that was when he ran across someone.

“Huh? You…?”

“Misaka?”

After casually speaking her name, he recalled what Furashina Ririn had said earlier.

She was dangerous.

She was known as a Hunter Hunter.

“What are you doing here? Are you watching the tournament?”

“More importantly.” Kamijou took a step back with a quizzical look on his face. “What’s with that getup? Are you a cheerleader???”

Mikoto followed his gaze down to her chest, her navel, and below. She quickly covered her miniskirt with both hands.

She rubbed her thighs together and blushed.

“I-I have my reasons! Like friendship, or unity, or something that started as a bit of fun but turned into representing District 7!!”

“???”

She snapped back at him, but she seemed to be her usual self.

He could not tell what had made Furashina so concerned.

Mikoto spotted the portable device attached near Kamijou’s belt.

“Oh, so you’re playing Virtual-On, too.”

“I only started recently, though. I really don’t know what I’m doing yet.”

“(I see. So he’s a beginner. Then he wouldn’t be deep enough into it to Defect. That’s good.)”

“Misaka?”

“Nyothing!!”

She shook her head, stuck her flailing hands in front of her face, and kept him from getting close.

“If I have time later, I can show you the ropes.”

“Hm? But…”

“Oh, well, you know what my school is like, right? I’m afraid what would happen if it got out I had a guy’s address registered. Unlike a cellphone, a lot isn’t known about how the data is managed, so it might be automatically linked to some SNS and the list might be stored somewhere else where the dorm manager could see it.”

“Oh, I see,” was all he could find to say.

Kamijou himself wanted to avoid playing against normal players since he had Defected. Defecting happened when you destroyed your controller while playing, but he had been inspired to do so while fighting the Blue Stalker who was a Defected player. That might not happened again, but there was still a chance of him leading someone else to Defect. And if he knew the risk, he wanted to avoid forcing that on another player.

“Well, I’ll be going,” said Mikoto. “Oh, right.”

“What is it?”

“If you see any other girls dressed like this, could you tell them I’m here?”

She clasped her hands in front of her face and made an odd request.

Kamijou looked puzzled.

“It’s not like I know anyone else from Tokiwadai.”

“They’re not actually Tokiwadai students. But if I get into the details, I’m afraid it would give you a connection to them and cause an unwanted miracle to happen. Then again, you have a way of expanding your group of friends no matter what, so that might not help much… Well, it doesn’t matter. Just please do that if you see them!”

“Sure.” After that casual response, Kamijou felt a need to say more. “But, Misaka, if things get really bad, come talk to me about it. I don’t want things to ever again end up like they did with that experiment.”

“…”

“Don’t think you’ve missed your chance because you didn’t come to me earlier and don’t assume I’ll get involved on my own when things get worse. As soon as things look bad, come tell me about it. It’s never too late to get a helping hand.”

“You…”

Mikoto started to say something, but she swallowed the words.

And she smiled.

“Understood. I won’t hesitate to get you involved next time. It doesn’t matter if you’re lined up at a ramen shop or if you’re fighting for a one-per-customer pack of eggs. You made me promise, so don’t you cry about it later.”

“Sure.”

Kamijou and Mikoto waved goodbye and parted ways.

After getting rid of the trash and taking a breath, the familiar girl was gone.

Only then did a fundamental question occur to him.

(What was she doing here anyway?)

He had no answer to that question.

He belatedly looked around the area.

But the familiar face he spotted was not Mikoto.

“Hi there, Kami-yan. I hear you’ve gotten a Defected PD and taken a step off the straight and narrow.”

He turned that way and saw short hair dyed blond, thin blue sunglasses, and gold accessories jangling from the neck. It was Tsuchimikado Motoharu. He was one of Kamijou’s classmates just like Aogami Pierce, but he had another face as well.

He was a magic side spy who had infiltrated Academy City from outside to monitor the city from within.

He was also a double spy who had worked his way into the underside of Academy City where he acted as a vanguard of the science side.

Kamijou’s mouth flapped.

“What? How do you-? How much do you-?”

“We’ll both be much happier if you don’t know the details, nyah. More importantly, Kami-yan, do you really understand what kind of situation you’ve wound up in?”

“Situation?”

“Where does the danger lie and who’s the enemy? Where shouldn’t you go and what shouldn’t you do? What does Defecting really mean? There are a lot of questions needing answering.”

“…”

Now that he mentioned it, Kamijou did not know any of that.

In his mind, gaining a Defected portable device gave your Virtuaroid much greater freedom but losing came with some kind of dangerous penalty. And during battle, there was a risk of causing your opponent to Defect if the situation was right. He had no proof of it, but that vague understanding gave off the same pressure as a minefield.

That was why his only plan was to avoid randomly challenging anyone else while finding a way to defeat the Blue Stalker who was likely to return for a rematch.

What was the penalty?

How exactly was it triggered?

“Open the search engine called Lord of Lords, change the overall search settings to a video

search, and type in ‘The Phoenix’. With a Defected PD, you should just barely manage to pick up on the site.”

“The Phoenix?”

“The administrator doesn’t give a crap about ‘the right to be forgotten’, so it’s a cruel site that gathers and saves any posts, videos, streaming broadcasts, records, leaked classified data, or personal information that was requested to be deleted. If you find it, then search ‘Fate of a Defected PD’ on the site itself. That should get you all the data you want, Kami-yan.”

However, Tsuchimikado added a “but”.

A light sharper than a knife stabbed out from behind his sunglasses.

That secret plotter continued to drive home a point.

“Do not search for anything else. Don’t mistype a single character. That place is a crucible of malice and home to the people who enjoy the internet’s dark side. If a normal person stays there for too long, it’ll seriously destroy their personality. Don’t forget that, nyah.”

“You mean…”

“It’s like Kunekune or Mary-san. Make a mistake and you could star in your very own creepy online legend, Kami-yan. …And be very careful from here on out. Nee-chin and that group should be taking action soon, nyah.”

“…”

Kamijou was left entirely speechless.

What had he gotten himself involved in? And how deeply? Wasn’t Defecting no more than turning off his own security settings to let Temjin move more smoothly?

He heard a cheer erupt in the distance.

Something major must have happened in the Virtual-On tournament.

But that enthusiastic heat only made this place feel all the colder.

Tsuchimikado waved and left, but Kamijou remained motionless in front of a food cart for a while. He felt a cold weight in his stomach that should have been full of coffee jelly.

He looked down at his portable device.

Accessing some strange site felt like throwing himself into the antlion pit, so he was hesitant to take that first step.

But he would definitely fall behind without enough information.

If it was just him, that would be one thing. But what if the depthless problem surrounding the Blue Stalker also reached Index and the others?

“I guess I have to do it.”

With that annoyed comment, Kamijou operated his portable device.

He changed the settings as Tsuchimikado had said, found the site, and typed in the search terms: Fate of a Defected PD.

That text had a dangerous ring to it and it produced a few dozen results. There were too many to fit on the screen and scrolling did not immediately reach the end.

But he was surprised to find that the results were not all cruel and gloomy files.

He tried opening one and found text from a short-message SNS.

“Cat Tar: I tried out that Defection thing that everyone’s talking about. I’d heard it really powers up your Material Analyze and, if the rumors are true, it also lets you use the Reverse Convert. I’m about to go try it out, so I’m really excited.”

The image used in place of an icon was of a girl about Kamijou’s age. Of course, he had no guarantee that was actually what this person looked like.

It was something else that caught his attention.

(Reverse Convert…?)

He had never heard that term before.

He just about typed the term into the site’s search box, but then he remembered Tsuchimikado’s warning: Do not search for anything else. Don’t mistype a single character. He slowly breathed out and obediently scrolled down hoping to find an answer in the information he had now.

“There it is.”

It was in blog format, but the page made him think it was an individual attempt at writing an online encyclopedia.

Reverse Convert.

Category: Rumor.

Veracity: Unknown.

In the Next Generation Game Virtual-On, a player can use the Material Analyze function to alter the parameters of their Virtuaroid. But a Defected PD can supposedly send the customized Virtuaroid’s modification data back to the player instead.

The veracity and meaning of this are both unknown.

Is it similar to inputting an RPG’s STR, INT, VIT, AGI, MIN, and LUK stats into the human body, or is it more like drawing out the magic and skills directly? How the supporters of this

rumor define it greatly changes what must be proven wrong in an argument against them.

However, how the Material Analyze applies adjustments to the Virtuaroids is still mostly shrouded in mystery, so it isn't hard to see how that black box led to rumors of how it might affect people instead.

If this were entirely true and worked with the Material Analyze, it would go beyond the plain Virtuaroid. If the data acquired from the real world could be inputted into your unit and then returned to the player, would it mean any material, traits, or conditions from the real world – such as bird feathers or the weight of iron – be incorporated into the human body?

"Returned to…the player?"

Kamijou spoke it aloud possibly because he was having trouble processing it in his mind.

(So is it like levelling up in a game and becoming stronger in reality? But Virtual-On isn't an RPG where you train your body. It's about robots…)

It would definitely cause problems if playing Virtual-On made him grow to colossal size or able jump up to a high-rise building's rooftop. He wanted a clearer definition of what this meant.

(Then again…)

This was Academy City.

Well-defined paranormal phenomena were common here.

The word Virtuaroid referred to a great variety of units and every one was different. He had selected several of them while fighting Index, and some had powerful attacks, some had thick armor, and some had high speed. There were simple ones like Apharmd which specialized in hand-to-hand fighting using nimble footwork, but there were also ones like Angelan or Specineff that gave physical form to the psychological or directly interfered with and attacked it.

What if that kind of "power" was directly drawn out?

That would mean more than just multiplying one's physical strength, allowing them to stop a metal bat with their skin, or letting them run faster than a car. What if they could reach the kind of power that could only be described as paranormal?

Wouldn't that mean the creation of a new "system" separate from Academy City's?

(Esper powers and magic can't coexist due to the side effects between them, but this could be dangerous if those side effects don't exist.)

Academy City's students found a great variety of ways to make use of a single power such as fire or water. So how far would things branch out if they could mix multiple powers?

For example, what if Misaka Mikoto gained the power to freeze her target's feet to hold them

in place before she fired her Railgun?

For example, what if Kamijou Touma gained any power at all to go along with his fist?

"…"

That possibility briefly crossed his mind, but Kamijou shook his head.

That seemed somehow wrong.

Even if he could easily acquire a new "system" and even if he could crawl up from being known as a Level 0, something was not right.

If he gained a power too easily, he would rely on it too easily.

If he had not faced that power over a long period of time, he would not know how to restrain himself.

And if he started using it like that, he would fail spectacularly at some point. If he broke his own bone, it might just mean a pricey bill, but if it bared its fangs against those around him, he could end up doing something unforgivable.

Plus, even if he could use the Material Analyze on himself, he could not predict how it would affect him or how far it would spread. He might combine the sturdiness of steel with the litheness of a wild beast, but that would not be thoroughly endurance tested and debugged like a corporate product. He would be incorporating it into his own body right away. The risk to himself and others was endless.

It sounded so ridiculous that he might have laughed it off if he had simply heard the rumor.

But Kamijou knew he could not do that.

Yes.

There had been an unnatural Ring Scan after he had Defected.

And he had apparently disappeared. Depending on how that worked, this could be very bad indeed.

He continued through the data and found a series of posts from a message board.

Unconfirmed Info Thread 19

Post 113:

Is the Reverse Convert really as convenient as they claim? Then again, there are some people getting all worked up over the possibility of it tearing down the current hierarchy that overemphasizes esper powers.

Post 114:

Yeah, but the risks are huge. It isn't normal to take on characteristics of other plants, animals, and machines via your unit's traits. It should be obvious to anyone who gives it two seconds of thought, but only people who can't do jack on their own will fall for this Reverse nonsense. Those losers deserve to lose.

Post 115:

Plus, it's not like you would only get the positive data from your unit. If you incorporated a fish's gills with the Material Analyze and then used the Reverse Convert, would you suffocate? In fact, wouldn't doing it with other animals screw with the layout of your blood vessels and pretty much always kill you instantly?

Post 116:

I don't know about anything that extreme, but check out the video sites. When someone makes a ton of rough plays and the refs dock them tons of points, things get bad. They apparently fall into a state a lot like sensory deprivation. That might mean something's being taken out of them, but it sounds dangerous when you add a Personal Reality into the equation. Real dangerous.

Post 117:

Personal Reality? I thought only the talentless would rely on the RC?

Post 118:

It's actually no laughing matter. Oh, if you don't know, sensory deprivation refers to being blindfolded and having your arms in tubes for a long period of time so your ability to think fades away. As they keep making rough plays and their debt piles up, their senses gradually dull and they end up in a similar state. And that'll lead to a collapse of their entire personality. In the worst cases, it might mess up their motor nerves and autonomic nerves, leading to loss of muscular strength and organ failure.

Post 119:

Nice essay there, lol. But there are a lot of different kinds of organ failure. Is it gonna kill their appendix?

Post 120:

It's the ones who laugh at it that go pale when they watch the video for fun.

Video sites.

Go pale.

Kamijou's fingertips started feeling heavy. Ominously, this was the result of searching the site for "Fate of a Defected PD". The closer he got to the heart of the matter, the greater the pressure grew.

He focused on the video files in the dozens of candidates available to him.

He soon found what he was looking for.

(Is this what they were talking about?)

It had likely been uploaded to some video sharing site or another. The window displayed the same girl seen in the short-message SNS icon.

However, something was wrong with her.

It was grainy footage. It looked like someone had filmed it with a cellphone or portable device instead of a specialized camera. The shaky footage appeared to be at a center somewhere and a large group of boys and girls were surrounding something. The cameraman was one of the onlookers.

That girl was at the center.

She was slumped down on the road and unable to stand on her own.

Her fingers clawed at her chest, her neck, and every other part of her body. Something not quite a voice and not quite a noise escaped the corner of her lips.

“H-hshhh…gahh, hkhhh…! S-someone…someone…!!”

Autonomic nerves and organ failure.

Wasn’t that what the posts on that message board had said?

“Fight-…cough, cough! Wheeze, wheeze…please…help…”

She lacked something.

And if she lacked something, it must have been taken away from her.

The footage was grainy and blurry, and Kamijou did not have any special video analysis software. But the odd tension escaping the small device told him all too well that this was not fake.

As the onlookers watched on in horror, a few of them finally prepared to fight her. Was that what she wanted, or was she simply so weak that lying down could easily cause her to suffocate on her own saliva? She could not walk herself, so she had to be carried to an egg-shaped cradle station inside the center. Eventually, the actual Virtual-On match began.

But.

“Hey, what’s going on? That girl isn’t moving!”

“This is bad. The negative judgment took away some of her points. She can’t fight like that. The ref doesn’t like how she’s relying on long-range and being too careful. No amount of shooting will help if she can’t score a down and she’s only losing points in the meantime. Her

command log must be growing entirely black. And if she loses any more points…!”

“That’s enough. We need to get her out of there. Cut her connection!”

People quickly gathered around the cradle station. They slid open the door.

And they found something strange inside.

Or rather, they did not find what should have been there.

The cradle station was a small room with no other exit.

And yet the girl had entirely vanished from within.

It quickly disappeared, but a slight ring of light was visible for a moment.

It looked like a hula hoop and it disappeared like it had been no more than an illusion.

Come to think of it, hadn’t Aogami Pierce mentioned an unnatural second Ring Scan?

The ring of light had passed over Kamijou from top to bottom and then he had vanished.

The size more than the shape reminded Kamijou of something.

(That thing on the Virtuaroid’s back. Was it called the V-Disc?)

As a beginner to the game, Kamijou did not know what that meant, but the documents gathered for him contained a text that answered that question.

“Well, it’s only part of the game’s setting,” [but it seems like the Virtuaroids aren’t just normal robots.] <The data in> {the V-Disc on their back} (is materialized and remade into something tangible.)

Kamijou frowned.

The text and explanation seemed to jump around because, while this was generally an amateur-compiled encyclopedia, it was made to gather the corresponding keywords from blogs and SNSs all across the internet and combine them as smoothly as possible when the cursor was placed over it.

You could always just call it big data, but this was only the most trusted opinion at the moment and that did not mean it was absolutely correct. Once more posts were made, this text would change. It was only a piece of reference material and could be dangerous to simply accept.

[The V-Disc sometimes glows red.] “And the cover called the motor deck” (will pop open.) <What does that mean?> {It also glows when dashing.}

But the contents shocked Kamijou enough that he froze in place for a while.

Was that true?

It wasn't just gathering some false information?

It was enough to make him wonder that.

"Aren't Virtuaroids pretty slim? They don't really have a spot large enough to fit a cockpit, do they?"

[The original setting has them being remote controlled.] (It's true I've never seen any kind of door or hatch open on the armor.) {That part on the back does seem the most suspicious since they all have it in common.} "And even if they did have a hidden door, there's no space inside. You'd be squeezed in tight." [Maybe it's more like being absorbed or swallowed than boarding. Where do our bodies go???]

That was no laughing matter when Aogami Pierce had said Kamijou Touma had vanished before his eyes.

Plus, this had turned up in the results of a search for "Fate of a Defected PD". Anything here had to be related to that.

There was more written there.

It must have been locked in some way because the text here did not change.

(Personal Opinion)

I honestly think the most likely explanation for the disappearing players is that they simply do not return after entering their Virtuaroid. Is it some kind of side effect, or is it a physical phenomenon made to look like that? However, I have no idea why anyone would want to copy a phenomenon no one knows about. Copycats generally see value in mimicking a famous incident that shocked everyone.

Are these disappearances centered on the Next Generation Game Virtual-On, or is there some overlap with something entirely different or a natural phenomenon? More discussion is needed on that question.

"……
……"

He tried to say "You're kidding, right?", but he could not even produce a scratchy voice.

What was really going on here?

Some unbelievable incident was underway at some level or another.

"…What happened?" he said without thinking.

What did this mean? What was he supposed to ask next???

If Aogami Pierce was right, a ring of light (The V-Disc's power?) carried the player away when using a Defected PD to fight.

So what had happened to that girl?

Could it be?

Had she disappeared and never returned?

Everything he saw here was data from the past. He could not ask it questions and expect an answer and it was impossible to change what he saw there.

But it affected him too.

He too had been thrown into that world.

So his senses could fade away.

He could fall into a state much like sensory deprivation, find himself unable to maintain his thoughts, and even have his organs fail.

And did it get even worse than that?

“You have to be kidding me. I haven’t heard much about these disappearances, but are Defected players of this Next Generation Game truly disappearing!?”

This could not be explained by the placebo effect or by light and sound stimulation.

This was touching on something related to a human’s…no, to the world’s laws.

A strange chill crawled across his skin.

Yes.

For one thing…

(I was using the Material Analyze like it’s normal, but it’s the same. It claims to be scanning the material, but how exactly does it do that?)

He tried checking through the rest of the data, but the further down the list he got, the less related the data was and he felt like the answers were vanishing before his eyes. This may have been a problem unique to the internet.

But most of the data he saw was far from reassuring.

Some were short-message SNS posts, some were requests for advice on a message board, and some were gameplay videos.

Due to the disparate formats, he felt like it was spreading to every corner of the city and it made his skin crawl. It was like flipping up the rug and finding tiny bugs covering the floor.

“No, no, no! I can’t even run 5 km anymore!?”

“I can’t see anything in my head when I read. The text doesn’t lead to any kind of image.

What's happening to me? Can I get back what was taken from me???"

"This is game, right? It's a competition. So it's like gambling: there's no way to keep winning forever! Even when you're playing fair and square, you sometimes get called on a rough play. You'll eventually hit a slump somewhere and you can't recover if that means something critical is taken from you. I bet they've only been thinking about taking everything from us from the beginning!"

Strengths, special skills, talents. It was a dance of sorrowful voices from those who had had the central pillar of their being stripped away.

Virtual-On was primarily a Next Generation Game in which one enjoyed battling others. And the Material Analyze feature allowed the players to adjust it as they saw fit. There was no single strongest Virtuaroid and people could put together their own specialized unit if they did not like who was currently at the top.

There was no way of guaranteeing victory.

There was no safe zone.

Even if a temporary one was found, the latest tactics would always be crushed by even newer tactics. From the lowest rookie to the top player, everyone would lose eventually. Even if someone tried to play fair, it was common for them to make a rough play when provoked enough. The problem was that the occasional rough play was weighted more heavily than all the times one played fairly.

Wasn't it time to stop complaining about inconvenience?

Wasn't it time to turn off the portable device's wireless…no, to switch it off altogether?

Kamijou started to think so, but then some more unconfirmed information shook him to the core.

"Come to think of it, I've heard that some people disappeared after Defecting even when they switched off the power. Does that mean the penalties keep piling up just because you're refusing to play? That'll piss off the people who have switched off their wireless because they don't want to lose another battle. Well, the Reverse Convert itself is fake, so maybe it's all nothing more than rumors."

There was no escape.

If there was, a search for their "fate" would not have turned up anything.

Or so it seemed after reading through this data from the past.

Part 9

Not all parts of the city were bustling with activity for the Virtual-On tournament.

Seedy darkness filled the depths of an alley.

A rhythmic clacking noise rang there. It was the sound of a modern-style cane that looked like a longer version of a T-shaped tonfa. White hair and red eyes were visible above it. Anyone even slightly familiar with Academy City would never want to meet this person in the shadows of the city. That monster walked slowly but resolutely down the narrow path.

He was Academy City's #1 Level 5.

He was known as Accelerator.

"Is this the place?"

The white-haired monster mercilessly kicked down the thick metal door. Something unbelievable occurred. He only tapped lightly with his toes, but the locks and the hinges immediately burst off and the door itself shot inside like an artillery shell.

The door was made of the same composite material as tanks and it was more than 50cm thick even if it had not looked it from the outside. The locks had a total of 16 bolts. More importantly, this was not just a back entrance. This space was architecturally positioned so that it was impossible to set foot inside without prying open the kind of door found on a bank vault.

He ignored all of it.

There were no windows inside. A lot of LCD monitors must have been lined up like in a day trader's dealing room, but they had all been smashed to pieces as the door shell flew by a second ago.

And beyond the bent door, the crushed contents of the sandwich uttered a messy groan.

"U-uuh…"

It was a young man. Due to living in an air-conditioned room year-round, he must have lost sight of the season. He was wearing a shirt and shorts that might have been indoor wear but might have been outdoor wear.

"Wh-who hired you? Are you here to delete a VIP's disgraceful data? But it's too bad for you. This is only a terminal. The online assets, that shared culture of knowledge, can never be infringed by anyone…"

"I can't believe this," muttered Accelerator. "I have no interest in your life."

"…"

"Cut the crap and don't bother looking into any of this. All you have to do is answer my questions and I'll free you from this shitty situation. Understand the rules?"

With that said, Accelerator looked around the room just once.

Most of the monitors were spewing sparks and useless, but there were some other notable things in here. There was a logo on the wall. Accelerator had seen it here and there on the internet and this man may have designed it himself and printed it out.

The Phoenix.

That cruel hidden site claimed its objective was to preserve, release, and share the disgraceful data found on the internet.

“Who are you spreading this data for?”

“Wh-what are you-…?”

The man trailed off.

The hand not holding the modern-style cane was suddenly holding a giant scythe taller than Accelerator.

It had nothing like a sheath and it was far too large to hide.

It seemed to have simply appeared from thin air.

No.

Wait.

“You can guess what this means, right?”

“…”

“Well, if I wanted to, I could use my vector manipulation to control the electrons in your head, but if I’ve got a specialized tool, I might as well use it.” Accelerator slowly shook the scythe’s tip as he spoke. “Isn’t Specineff a Virtuaroid that specializes in psychological attacks and hits the enemy with various status disorders?”

“W-wait. Wait just a- ebrmorgjah!?”

The tip of the scythe-shaped weapon named Ifleesa merely touched the collapsed man’s forehead.

His language capability collapsed, his expression faded, and his body grew limp in only a few seconds.

The #1 had clearly caused a paranormal phenomenon separate from his vector manipulation.

And it was from a different system than Academy City’s esper development.

To top it all off, he displayed no side effects whatsoever.

“…This really isn’t funny,” spat out the white-haired monster while resting the scythe’s handle on his shoulder.

The man sprawled out on the floor was now a faucet of words. It was time to get the needed information out of him.

The #1 asked the exact same question again.

“Who are you spreading this data for?”

There was a dramatic difference.

The man revealed the information with empty eyes. It was happened so smoothly it was actually creepy.

It was less like he was being obedient or cooperative and more like he had been deprived of food and sleep and then kept from resisting through violence or drugs.

“No one hired me. I had a small goal in letting it be known I was gathering articles on the Defections and revealing that hidden data.”

“Out with it.”

“Assets.”

He spoke normally.

There were none of the phony niceties found at a bank ATM.

But that created a mismatch that left no sense of a human will behind the words, so it filled the listener with an intense impression that something was wrong.

“Virtual-On rapidly spread across Academy City, right? But you can’t start that kind of movement for free. With the portable devices, the specialized centers, and how the information was advertised and spread, someone paid a ton of money to get that done. It’s the same as airing lots of ads during primetime. I heard an interesting rumor saying the user known as the Blue Stalker had started it all. Makes you wonder just how much money they’ve got, doesn’t it?”

“…”

“Of course, Virtual-On has gained an insane amount of attention. Do you call it the power to spread information? I mentioned TV ads before, but the billboards and banners at that tournament have gone way beyond that level. They’ve gained control of a very large market share. The more money you spend, the more you can earn. Construction companies, general trading companies, and famous corporations must want to contact them. They’ve spread their roots more than you can imagine.”

Even though the information was being forced out, the man spoke with more and more intensity.

It may have been his own nature influencing how he obeyed the order.

“I’ve managed to get my hands on information proving that they’ve got a hell of a sponsor. It’s a certain old man. An Academy City VIP. He’s intentionally kept himself off the Board of Directors and away from other power structures, but that lets him spread his business like crazy. So why is he giving the Blue Stalker mountains of gold to make Virtual-On a success? How does he benefit? This is something that VIP wants to succeed no matter what. If I can find his Achilles’ heel, I might be able to get my hands on the leftovers of an unbelievably large mountain. And to do that, I need to gather all sorts of information. And without anyone suspecting my true motives.”

“Such nonsense,” spat out Accelerator as he glanced toward the wall.

Several photographs were pasted there with red threads and pins connecting them. It likely diagramed the flow of money. There must have been no data on the Blue Stalker because there was only a black piece of paper as a placeholder.

Then there was the old man in question.

The formally dressed gray-haired man looked so spotless you would think he had been born wearing a custom-fitted suit. He did not give off any hint of malice and he had the kind of “roundness” that would look at home feeding pigeons in front of a museum.

But no one in the world was truly innocent.

The more someone looked like they were, the more effort they put into the illusion.

(I guess I’ll give him a visit next.)

Accelerator sighed and then Specineff’s scythe vanished into thin air.

Like a switch had been thrown, a human will and human emotions reappeared in the collapsed man’s eyes. He looked utterly bewildered like a villager who had come to in the middle of a crop circle after being abducted by a UFO.

The #1 was done with him, so he only said one thing more.

“Sorry about the mess.”

“U-uweh!? What? What happened? Oh, right. H-hey! Did you, um, know? Was this some kind of warning? If…if we’re after the same target, uh, we could always work togeth-…”

The monster brought the Ifleesa scythe back into existence and held its handle.

That weapon specialized in manipulating…no, contaminating and destroying the mind.

He whispered like the grim reaper with it in hand.

Except his words hinted at something more fearsome than death.

“Do you want me to turn you into an honest man, you piece of shit?”

Part 10

After scanning the swans, bugs, other things in the park, Kamijou and Index walked to the train station where they scanned the train and an extremely expensive-looking off-road bicycle. On the way, they had figured out a few methods of walking smoothly through the crowds.

Evening arrived in the meantime, so they decided to call it quits for the day.

The long weekend was not over yet. The players would advance to the finals tomorrow, so the excitement would be even greater than today.

Kamijou did not know where the Blue Stalker would appear during that.

“Touma, should I do that Defection thing too? It looks like it would let me zoom around real fast.”

“No, it would be safer to keep our options open. I want us to have someone who has Defected and someone who hasn’t. If it turns out you need a normal portable device to cancel the Defection, we would have trapped ourselves.”

“I see…” muttered Index, but he was keeping a secret from her.

Defection was much more dangerous than he had thought.

(According to Furashina…Misaka has Defected too. That worries me.)

He was both worried for her and worried about how she was using her Defected device. When he had seen her in the park, she had seemed cut off from daily life due to her cheerleader outfit. That was fine if she was only cheering on a friend, but things could take a turn for the worse in several ways if she was directly taking part in the tournament.

Plus, there was the ominous comment from Furashina Ririn, who may have been the model for Lilina and who might have a connection to Virtual-On’s mysterious developer.

What was it she had said when she saw Misaka Mikoto?

If possible, he did not want anyone else to get involved in the Defection. Of course, the rumors might only be rumors and it might all be perfectly safe, but he had a feeling that was unlikely to be the case.

If that was all this was, Tsuchimikado Motoharu would not have approached him with his “hidden face”.

And Tsuchimikado had said something else of note.

…Nee-chin and that group should be taking action soon, nyah.

Nee-chin. Kanzaki Kaori. She was one of the world's fewer than 20 Saints and an anti-magical combat expert who belonged to the Anglican Church's 0th Parish Necessarius.

Her skill and strength were of course an issue, but there was a more fundamental problem there.

(This is spreading beyond Academy City and the science side…)

Kamijou silently gulped.

(Is this big enough that the magic side has to take action? In that case, Tsuchimikado might have been warning me as a magician. Virtual-On, a Next Generation Game, Defection, Reverse Convert… What is going on around me?)

"Touma, what is it?"

"Hm?"

Index peered up at him from below, so he smiled a little.

"We can't eat out for two meals in a row, right? I can't choose between tonkatsu and Salisbury steak for dinner. Since everyone's cutting loose and enjoying the tournament, the more reliable supermarket sales might be wide open. This is our chance, Index."

"T-Touma! I've heard of a wonderful term known as a mixed grill!!"

"Please give some thought to how hard something is to make!"

"But two meats might not be enough for a real mixed grill… Ah! We just have to add on crab cream croquettes for the perfect trinity!!"

"We don't have to go with a mix. Just choose one of them!"

"Then what will it be!? What will our main dish be tonight!?"

"We could compromise and go with white flesh fish…"

"That's worse! Way worse!! That's not a compromise at all, Touma!!"

"Fried fish is great!! Apologize to the pollock of the seven seas!!"

Kamijou and Index bickered all the way back to the dorm.

But Kamijou realized something once they were back in their room…or rather, once he opened the fridge.

"Oh, no. We only have half a head of cabbage and a bottle of soy sauce."

"T-Touma, you don't need to keep soy sauce in the fridge."

"Gwah, It's a pain, but I guess I have to head out. I'll stop by the supermarket, so you wait

here.”

“I’ll go too! The supermarket has tasty-…”

“It’s about time you faced the facts, Index: you’ve been blacklisted from the tasty samples corner! It’s hard to get information on sales when you’re with me, so wait here until I’m back with the pollock.”

“Wahh!! Didn’t this start with tonkatsu and Salisbury steak as the options!?”

Index threw a tantrum on the floor, but Kamijou left her and the cat there and stepped back out the door.

(Now, then.)

He could set up a nice surprise for Index by coming back with tonkatsu meat after so much talk of fried fish. Kamijou Touma’s house-husband technique knew no bounds!!

And there was something else he had to focus on now.

“Lilina.”

“Yes, yeees. Should I provide information on nearby crowds and a list of sales?”

“Do that and include whether or not I can use those coupons. By the way, how is that Preset A that I put together today? Can I use it?”

“Yes, but it puts a little too much emphasis on speed. Basically, you have to make up for its thin armor by dodging, so it’s really more suited for experts. Given your average victory rate, I think it’ll negatively affect your growth.”

“Lilina, do you still have the data on the Blue Stalker battle?”

“Yes, of course. The results are automatically stored unless the data space is close to filling up. Knowing my user’s habits helps me perform my functions as a support AI.”

“Then I have a question: with all the unfair methods that thing used, do you really think a unit suited for beginners can beat them?”

“Well, no, not a chance. I suppose you should put together a preset meant for fighting the Blue Stalker and nothing else.”

He took the elevator to the ground floor and walked through the orange-dyed streets.

“Since you left your partner back there, I assume you’re planning to do more than just shop.”

“I want to see how Preset A is doing. If I can use it, that’s great. If I can’t, I can figure out how I need to alter it from here. But if I say that in front of Index, she’s sure to insist I experiment on her.”

“Yeah, and you ended up Defecting due to your battle with the Blue Stalker.”

“Lilina, can you search for those…um, the ones controlled by the CPU.”

“NPCs?”

“Yes, that. Can you search for NPC Virtuaroids? I don’t have to worry if they’re programs.”

“Yes, sir. Leave it to me.”

The small screen displayed a map of the nearby area and it was quickly filled with red dots. Each one was given a number and a different window provided a list of the unit used and the NPC’s name.

“Will I receive a penalty from repeated rough plays in an NPC battle too? And as that debt grows, I’ll enter a state similar to sensory deprivation until my personality collapses, I suffer organ failure from damage to my autonomic nerves, and possibly even disappear altogether. It’s hard to believe this could cause human beings to disappear entirely if the conditions are right, but maybe it’s just that I don’t want to believe it. I wish I knew the truth.”

“Then how about you start with the weakest NPC you can find?”

“If possible, I want one that uses Cypher.”

“Okay. Adjusting matching conditions. Searching for open users based on unit name. Hm, hm, hm…(searching)…done. How about this one, Touma-sama?”

One of the many red dots turned green.

An NPC named Strings was using Cypher.

Its win rate was below 20%. Matches against other players were the main draw of Virtual-On, so the program-controlled NPC Virtuaroids mostly only existed as practice opponents. Some of them seemed to be set up for beginners.

“There is also a Fei-Yen NPC nearby. It is named Warp Shooter. If you try to draw in the Cypher, you might also draw it in.”

“Both of their win rates are pretty low.”

“Well, NPCs are only meant to help rookies get used to the battles.”

“Okay, let’s go with them, Lilina. Our main focus is the Cypher, but we’ll keep going even if the Fei-Yen joins in.”

“Roger that. You can let me set up the match.”

Part 11

She did not have her usual voice.

Her usual friend was no longer by her side.

What had stolen those things from her?

What did she need to rescue her?

She clenched her teeth.

She slowly opened her closed eyes.

The girl made a decision.

Part 12

It did not go well.

Kamijou could not find the NPC Virtuaroid.

“That’s strange.” Lilina tilted her head on the screen. “Our coordinates are in the same spot on the simple display.”

Kamijou looked around the streets too, but the Virtuaroids were gigantic. If one really was here, it would be hard to miss. Evening was switching over to sunset, but the residual excitement of the tournament kept a lot of people on the streets. If there was a Virtuaroid around, there would be at least some cheering, but there was nothing.

After pondering that for a bit, a thought occurred to Kamijou.

“Lilina, the map is only a simple display, right? It only shows two-dimensional information.”

“Eh? Are you suggesting it’s hiding on a building rooftop or something?”

“The opposite.” Kamijou pointed at his feet. “What if it’s made its way deep underground?”

He operated the portable device to open the folder of pictures he had taken. He opened one of those: a sign standing next to the manmade lake in the neighboring district’s park.

The sign provided information concerning a water level adjustment drainage ditch.

“I’ve heard they have underground structures that guide water away to prevent flooding when it rains a lot. I was thinking I might be able to trap the Blue Stalker there so they couldn’t use their speed properly, but that might be where this one is. Lilina, check for an entrance near here.”

“Sure, sure. Wow, there really is a maintenance entrance.”

“Then let’s head there. But should I really be doing this for a game? I feel like I’m going well beyond just walking around while using a smartphone.”

A metal door was hidden in the city and it led to a gray concrete stairway that never seemed to end. Kamijou decided to obediently apologize and leave if a worker found him, but that did not happen. He doubted he was simply lucky. After all, Kamijou Touma and misfortune were constant companions. He let Lilina guide him, so she had likely chosen the most deserted route.

He ultimately found himself in a vast space lined with thick columns.

Overall, it was larger than a school campus.

It had been built with functionality in mind, but it contained the aura of an ancient temple.

And…

“I found it this time. There’s the NPC Virtuaroid, Touma-sama. The Cypher named Strings is there as you requested, and the Fei-Yen named Warp Shooter is nearby. If you challenge the one, it will end up 1-against-2, but is that okay?”

“Is that so?”

A snapping sound came from Kamijou’s hands.

He had removed the ultra-thin goggles from the bottom of his portable device.

“Then let’s practice with them.”

Part 13

The reality of it seemed to permeate not just his eyes and ears, but his nose and mouth as well.

It was less like it was being displayed in some way and more like he really had been sent “here”.

The bundles of artificial muscle could be heard expanding and contracting. The joints grinded like a car’s shift lever.

The vividness seemed to pierce his skin and dive deep inside his body with a density not found in the real world.

"…"

From within the cramped cockpit, Kamijou Touma looked to the concrete floor he was supposedly actually standing on.

There was no spiky-haired boy there.

It was of course possible the display was set up not to show him there, but he recalled what Aogami Pierce had said: Kamijou Touma had suddenly vanished before his eyes.

In that case, where was he now?

Was he inside or outside the Virtuaroid? …Or was there some 3rd possibility he could not even guess at???

He pictured the empty space in the strange video file after the girl disappeared.

It was an odd sense of unease, like clicking link after link while surfing the web and suddenly finding the "back" button and "close" button would not respond.

"Please focus on the battle before your eyes, Touma-sama. It's starting."

"…That's right."

With the announcement of "get ready", his unit was given freedom.

This time, he was double checking how well his Defected Temjin could move. He ignored his damage percentage and relative position to the enemy while he jumped straight up. This space was large enough to forget it was underground, so he did not have to worry about bumping his head.

The cursor controlled by the FCS automatically wavered and then locked on a corner of the ground.

"Lock acquired. Distance to Cypher: 300. You only have one cursor, so keep an eye on the Fei-Yen so as not to let it move freely."

He ignored Lilina's report.

He ended the repulsion assistance in midair, twisted his body, spun the unit around, and swung the long, close-range sword named the Blitz Saber to irregularly shift his center of gravity. His unit spun vertically and horizontally. While rotating like a gymnast, he softly placed his feet on the side of one of the many thick columns. Then he moved to the next column. He continued jumping in a triangular pattern.

Even the floating referee sphere seemed disoriented.

"Wow…"

He heard an odd sound from behind as he pulled off the supposedly impossible acrobatics. The unit's V-Disc was probably turning red hot at frightening speed.

He gained a renewed appreciation of how much more freedom he had.

In the Next Generation Game Virtual-On, movement was achieved through application of dash canceling and vertical canceling, but that usually boiled down to straight lines between points, combinations thereof, right angles, zigzags, and U-turns.

But this was entirely different.

The simple dividing line between movements had vanished after Defecting. He felt like he had much more control over the automatically-controlled turbo repulsion. By intentionally shifting his center of gravity, he could make high-speed reversals or adjust the direction of the turbo, and he could move his upper body and lower body separately. That led to incredible actions reminiscent of a gymnast or a break dancer.

Movement direction usually came down to the 4 cardinal directions, the 4 diagonals, and up and down using jumps, but there was no such limitation after Defecting. Arrows of freedom stuck out in all 360 degrees like a hedgehog. Instead of being able to do anything as long as he came up with the idea, it felt more like his ideas took form directly.

“This would be why a normal Virtuaroid doesn’t stand a chance. It’s like all the other pieces are stuck to the chess board’s squares and can only move on their turn, but this one piece can move anywhere it wants in real time.”

“Touma-sama. Testing your abilities is all well and good, but too many unnecessary movements will delay the battle and possibly earn you a negative judgment. And we are here to practice, so there is no need to attempt a flawless victory. As long as you do not trip and fall down, hits are not a major issue. In fact, I recommend intentionally taking some hits to make yourself look weak. Regardless, please keep the rules in mind.”

“That’s a good…point!”

He leaped from the side of a column and soared through the air. He had clearly passed the limits of a midair dash. Instead of his speed rising evenly with distance and time, he folded up his limbs to increase his aerodynamics and focused his turbo repulsion in the best direction to match the wind and air conditions. That sent him well past the preset top speed.

It only took him a moment to reach the enemy Cypher highlighted by the FCS cursor.

He could ignore the Fei-Yen approaching from elsewhere. The difference in capability was plain, so it could not catch up.

Perhaps because it was an NPC without a will of its own, the Cypher had a weightless, flat-looking visual. It was a plain and natural unit that showed no sign of a unique human inside it.

Kamijou charged in like a meteor and made a direct midair attack with the Blitz Saber.

This was not one of the preset motions.

He only had some colorful buttons and smooth sticks, and yet he had enough freedom to move each of Temjin’s fingers individually. He could not explain how. Instead of knowing the

proper commands, it felt like the necessary commands simply appeared in his mind when he thought about what he wanted to do.

He landed while the NPC faltered, circled around behind it, and fired a point-blank series of glowing bullets that were meant to be used at long range. In exchange for the weapon gauge depleting, the Cypher pitched forward and collapsed.

“Legal hit: 2 points.”

Eventually, the unmanned Cypher slowly got back on its feet and made a horizontal slash of its close-range sword while turning around.

The speed was the same.

But the difference in freedom was remarkable. The close-range attack seemed to awkwardly move along fixed rails while Kamijou’s Temjin forced it back with its own close-range sword.

Then his leg flew.

There was no entry on the command list for this attack and it had no weapon gauge.

The kick hit the Cypher in the center of the gut and it rolled on and on along the ground.

And it collided with the Fei-Yen that had been left out thus far.

The two Virtuaroids collapsed together.

“Legal hit with 2 units downed at once: 4 points. Current score: 6 – 0. You’re doing well, Touma-sama.”

After taking a step back, he relocked his long-range weapon.

The Cypher and Fei-Yen squirmed in the middle of the large space for a while.

“Since the two downed units did not recover within 3 seconds, you earn another 2 points. Current score: 8 – 0.”

Their movements seemed awfully slow, but Kamijou could no longer tell if that was due to them being set up for beginners to practice on or due to his senses being sped up by Temjin.

“The Cypher has begun its transformation process. You can obstruct it.”

“No, let’s wait for it. I want to experience its top speed for myself.”

The Cypher forgot to get up, but its arms and legs folded up as it transformed into the sharp silhouette of a fighter jet. Close-range swords appeared on both sides along the edge of the main wings and they sliced toward Kamijou’s Temjin to let its speed do the talking.

The wind roared violently.

But that wind was a Temjin tornado that caught the Cypher’s straight-line path.

The explosive sound arrived after a short delay.

Temjin whirled around as if in a dance using sharp footwork, the centrifugal force of swinging around its Blitz Saber, and the invisible repulsion used for jumping and dashing. He bent over at the last second to avoid Cypher's charge and made a top speed attack to cross that path.

It was a two-handed close-range attack.

It felt more like hitting a homerun with a bat than slicing with a sword.

With a deafening metallic noise, the Cypher was sent flying. Due to its original speed, it ended up in a crushed state halfway between fighter jet and humanoid and it once more hit the Fei-Yen and sandwiched it against a nearby column.

"Legal hit with 2 units downed at once: 4 points. Current score: 12 – 0. That was pretty decisive."

The Fei-Yen and Cypher crumbled to the ground like a pizza slowly sliding down after being thrown against the wall.

It was overwhelming.

This was the power of Material Analyze adjustments plus Defecting. It was hardly surprising the NPC Virtuaroids for beginners could not keep up.

"I wouldn't get anything more out of practicing with them."

"Then why not finish them off? They're aligned perfectly for piercing them both at once. Double destruction would probably earn 10 points."

Kamijou now knew that his speed-focused Preset A functioned properly and that he could pilot it without losing control, so this had gone well.

Index was probably hungry, so he decided to take the standard number of points, finish them off, and end the game.

But then…

"Touma-sama. We have an intruder. A human player. Direction: southwest. Distance: 500. Here they come."

A gigantic beam of light surged by and scorched the air.

Kamijou's Temjin moved just before it arrived. He rotated like a figure skater, flipped around, and just barely dodged the high-power laser weapon.

He clicked his tongue as he guessed at the direction the shot had come from and circled behind a column.

(A Raiden…!? But they've really focused on firepower!!)

This underground area was hard to get to, so who had bothered coming here?

He wanted to avoid battling others now that he had Defected. He wanted to avoid causing another player to Defect in the same way the Blue Stalker had for him. That said, there was a hurdle stopping him from losing on purpose. When Defected players made rough plays that abandoned the match, their senses would gradually dull until they reached a state similar to sensory deprivation and their personality collapsed. There was ultimately a risk of organ or autonomic nerve failure. There were also rumors of them permanently disappearing under certain conditions, but how far he had to go for that to happen and what exactly it meant were still unknown. He was hesitant to carelessly use up his countdown toward death when he did not know how much was left.

Which meant…

“Lilina! Navigation change! Provide high-speed combat support and switch to quick attacks!! I’ll take them and the NPCs out for both sets before they can Defect like I did!! I’m not going to drag them into this dangerous situation along with me!!”

“Aye, sir! I like the sound of that. A merciless beatdown given with a considerate and peaceful heart? That sounds like your usual routine, Touma-sama.”

“What!? I’m not that kind of boy!!”

There was no cool-off period.

The Raiden must have been given considerable reinforcement with the Material Analyze feature because another beam of light enveloped everything soon thereafter. They had an advantage in a long-range shootout, so Kamijou had his Temjin dash forward to fill the gap.

His ETA was 5 seconds.

Like an anti-ship missile approaching a warship, he skimmed forward at extreme low altitude while dodging the enemy Raiden’s attacks.

Or he meant to, anyway.

The Binary Lotus laser cannon supposedly only stuck out to the side, but it changed direction to swing around behind a giant column.

“!?”

“That was close! Touma-sama, a single hit from Raiden’s laser will blast your unit to smithereens, so be careful!! Keep your balance!!”

That would be impossible for a normal Raiden.

The stress of both their actions rapidly caused the V-Discs on their backs to glow red.

The Binary Lotus laser cannon supposedly provided ultra-high power in exchange for requiring the unit to stop and fire in only one direction, but this Raiden had forcibly swung it

around.

Which meant…

“Are they Defected, too!?”

The thick beam of light approached close enough to graze Temjin’s left arm.

“A hit from that means instant death! You have to dodge it!!”

Appearances no longer mattered.

Kamijou’s Temjin dove forward and rolled along the ground.

“That counted as a down and they get 2 points. But it’s better than being destroyed! Well done!!”

He could not continue rolling forever. It was all over if another shot was fired after him. Kamijou’s Temjin spread its legs while lying face down, spun around, regained its mobility like a break dancer, and got back up in a single smooth motion.

Raiden’s giant form was nearby.

For whatever reason, it was customized with a sporty light purple coloration.

“Wha-…!?”

(They’re so close!! But how!?)

Normally thinking, they would not have had time to shift into a high-speed dash using their repulsion so soon after firing. Had they used the Material Analyze feature to thoroughly improve their speed?

“Please focus! Close-range warning!!”

“!!”

The Raiden made a horizontal swing of their close-range weapon that had a bazooka-like silhouette and was more of a blunt weapon than a sword. Kamijou bent at the waist and ducked his upper body to avoid it. With repeated short repulsion dashes, he smoothly slid around and behind the Raiden.

Kamijou’s Blitz Saber gave a roar toward the defenseless back.

A moment later, the Raiden’s Zig-18 bazooka hopped up from below.

But not to target anything.

The ultra-heavy bazooka swung back as if drawing out a semicircle. The Raiden itself formed a large arc with its own body as if performing a bridge.

In other words, the Raiden's body was dragged backwards in order to aim the bazooka at Kamijou's Temjin.

His throat went dry.

Temjin leaped to the side and just barely avoided the released explosive.

Before the giant explosion even occurred behind them, Temjin and Raiden had made their next move.

Even the overhead referee sphere was disoriented by their speed.

"So…that's it!!" shouted Kamijou through clenched teeth.

In the Next Generation Game Virtual-On, attacks from their weapons and their weight after jumping from an elevated position could not even damage the road. That made it easy to forget, but Raiden was heavy. But it also had the power to move its giant body. From there, it came down to how to use that power. It moved its giant body, swung around its colossal weapons, intentionally shifted its center of gravity, and made forcefully sharp turns by tossing itself around. It was on an entirely different level to Temjin which only moved left and right with the unit's footwork.

The unnaturally quick approach after firing earlier had been done by making use of some kind of "weight" to free itself from its stiffness. For example, it could have struck a nearby wall or column with its Zig-18 bazooka and used the reactionary force to provide some initial speed.

The supposedly heavyweight Raiden ran every which way, made short hops, and attacked from straight above like a meteor. It moved at such dizzying speeds that the FCS cursor could not keep up. Even with the lock display active, he would not hit if he fired. He could not keep up, so he shouted a command.

"Lilina! Cancel the autolock!! I'll be better off aiming manually!!"

"Aye, sir! Now you're sounding like a real pilot. But don't forget the risks!!"

A metallic roar rang out.

Kamijou's Blitz Saber and Raiden's bazooka-like Zig-18 were locked together.

Kamijou felt a chill. He took no damage, but he wanted to avoid locking himself in place so close to an enemy with such great firepower. Restricting his freedom of motion was always a bad thing.

(Who is this person…?)

He could not hope to match them. In terms of pure horsepower, the enemy Raiden outdid his own Temjin. He was gradually pushed back.

(A Defected player that butts into NPC battles. …Huh? That sounds familiar. A player who

builds up their score by targeting weak NPCs is known as a Hunter and a player that specializes in defeating those Hunters is known as a Hunter Hunter…)

At that point, Kamijou gasped.

Hadn't Furashina Ririn said that "people like her are known as Hunter Hunters, so you need to be careful"?

And who had that been in reference to?

"Is that Misaka!?"

He also recognized the purple coloring from her cheerleader outfit when he saw her in the park.

He received a communication request as if to answer him.

But she may not have known his identity.

"I don't know who you are…"

The chill in her voice was enough to tell him that.

"And it doesn't matter what you're trying to do here. But…"

She paused briefly and seemed to shove something toward him with her words.

"If you continue to use my friend as your stepping stone like you did here, I will tear you apart in Virtual-On until you break."

The equilibrium shattered.

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Wait, Misa-…!!"

The Raiden pushed Temjin's Blitz Saber away. She then launched a powerful kick toward his gut. Kamijou moved back to negate the impact and had his hands full simply maintaining his balance.

Meanwhile, the Raiden once more opened the Binary Lotus laser cannons like parabolic antennae on her shoulders.

Fear clenched Kamijou's heart as the color white filled his vision.

But she apparently only intended to blind him. She swept it away from him, perhaps to drive home that this was a warning. The next thing he knew, the Raiden had vanished from his FCS cursor. Misaka Mikoto was nowhere to be found.

Her friend.

A stepping stone.

Practice NPCs.

“What…is going on?”

He received a response from an unexpected place.

“Umm, maybe she meant this?”

“?”

“I was reviewing the records from the previous NPC Cypher and Fei-Yen, and look at this here.”

Lilina opened a new window and called up a battle record video.

Kamijou watched it without expecting much.

But then he thought his heart had frozen over.

Part 14

Cypher was a special Virtuaroid with the ability to transform.

It fought in both a humanoid form and a fighter jet form.

When the Cypher had charged in using its fighter jet form during the earlier battle, Kamijou’s Temjin had used a close-range to strike back and that had slammed it against a nearby column.

The fierce attack had prevented the Cypher from fully returning to its humanoid form, so it had collapsed to the concrete floor in a crushed “in between” form.

It had been neither man nor bird.

And that partially transformed state had exposed a portion of the inner structure that was normally hidden below the armor.

A giant disc had jutted out at a warped angle. It was the V-Disc which should have been neatly contained in the unit’s back. It had stopped rotating and fully cooled.

And…

The blood-soaked upper body of a girl was sticking out of it.

“What…is this…?” muttered Kamijou in a daze.

He could tell his hands were trembling unnaturally as he held the portable device.

“Analyzing footage: 94.9% probability that it is a human.”

“I know that! But what is that disc!? And I don’t mean the official explanation. Why is there a human in a program-controlled NPC Cypher!?”

The V-Converter was worn like a boxy backpack. The V-Disc was contained inside. And a human body had emerged like it was a fairy spring or a strange magic trick.

What this was and how it worked were both unknown.

But the sight forced him to conclude that there had been someone inside that unit.

He also had to ask the more fundamental question of whether people could even “ride” the Virtuaroids. Was he really inside Temjin, or was he monitoring it remotely from elsewhere? He could not even answer that, but now a girl had appeared from within an unmanned NPC Cypher used for practice.

And she was bleeding a concerning amount.

No, had Kamijou done that to her?

(Wait a second. That girl…)

Something caught his attention.

And then he remembered that site known as The Phoenix.

(Is that the girl from the video who disappeared as a penalty!?)

“Oh, right! Lilina, how much time left in the match!?”

“20 seconds. Although the accumulated damage might cause it to fall apart and be destroyed before that happens. If so, the match will end regardless of the countdown. And in this irregular situation, I’m not sure if the next set will even happen.”

“Dammit!!”

He held down the turbo and dashed forward. He charged toward where the Cypher lay collapsed on the ground. Meanwhile, the recorded footage showed the Cypher gradually transforming into its humanoid form. The V-Disk was being stored back inside as if to trap the living human within.

“What are you trying to do?”

“Pull her out of there!!”

As soon as he shouted that, he heard a light beep.

That signaled the end of the match.

Kamijou Touma watched as the scene around him changed. An out-of-place fanfare played from the thin sub-monitor. The walls that surrounded the field were removed and Temjin's movement was locked.

Kamijou gasped at the sudden stop and he could only watch as it happened.

"Wait…"

The NPC Cypher vanished into thin air as if to say it was no longer needed.

The girl's upper body sank back down into the stopped V-Converter.

What would happen if the Virtuaroid disappeared here? What would happen if he could not pull that girl out of there? Would other players ignorantly do the same thing Kamijou had? Would she be summoned, destroyed, sent back into the ether, and resurrected once more?

In fact, had she already repeated that process countless times?

She had been made into a zombie as she played the contradictory role of a human NPC.

"Waaaa

A banging sound rang within the cocoon-like spindle-shaped cockpit. Misaka Mikoto forced herself to breathe slow and deep as she sat in the invisible seat. She was trying to calm herself, but it was not working well.

Far too many people did not know the truth of the NPC Virtuaroids.

To those carefree players, those trapped people were the perfect targets.

“What was with that Temjin…?”

She had failed to rescue them again.

She had yet to successfully rescue one of them.

But she could not afford to give up.

Mikoto shut down the Virtual-On system and pushed the goggles up onto her forehead. The evening wind chilled her sweaty skin. She stuck the goggles back in her portable device, toyed with the device in her hands, and opened its address book.

She looked at the list of names, but did not contact any of them.

She could not contact them.

She shut her eyes, wrinkled her brow, and pictured someone.

That missing girl was a part of her team.

The girl’s usual voice was gone now.

She had been swallowed up by that giant system and was now used as an eternal sandbag.

Her desperate pleas and sorrowful cries were all sealed away.

(I have to do something…)

Mikoto clenched her teeth and repeated the thought: I have to do something.

Part 16

“…”

Kamijou Touma could not speak for a while.

He was utterly overwhelmed.

The Virtual-On match had ended and he had been thrown out into the open world away from Temjin. He trudged up the stairs and returned to the city surface.

But.

Before, there had been another person…no, two other people in this city who were no longer there.

In truth, they might still be out there somewhere in Academy City. Except they would only be there to let someone destroy them. They had been turned into zombies who were eternally defeated over and over again.

“What was that…?”

He spoke of that hopeless outcome in a dazed voice.

“That’s too cruel. Things like that aren’t supposed to happen. It’s…it’s just…!!”

He felt anger, but he had nowhere to direct it. He had no way of knowing where that girl had gone or where she would appear next.

But was it really right to do what Mikoto was doing and attack the players targeting NPCs? He knew firsthand that forcing others to keep up with his Defected Virtuaroid could trigger a new Defection.

“…Lilina.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Misaka said something about not using her friend as a stepping stone, right?”

“Misaka-san? Searching list of names…hm? Hmm???”

He realized that the previous one-sided transmission had never included the name Misaka Mikoto.

“I mean that purple Raiden that intruded on our battle.”

“Oh! Link made. I can respond appropriately from now on, Touma-sama.”

(Was that girl the friend she mentioned?)

Kamijou thought for a bit.

(No, if everyone who drops out after Defecting ends up like that…just how many players have been turned into NPCs? It’s possible that a unit other than that Cypher or Fei-Yen holds someone much closer to Misaka.)

It could be someone else from Tokiwadai Middle School.

It could be someone who was always by her side.

It could be someone who lived in the same dorm.

…It could be someone she wanted to avoid losing at all costs.

(Think…)

Kamijou Touma wrinkled his brow as he lost himself in thought.

(I'm a part of this. Since I've Defected, I could end up like that if I make the wrong decision. So think. What was that? Is it possible to save them, or is it too late? Whether or not you can save them and knowing how to if so is the key to preparing a lifeline in case I need it. So what am I supposed to do? Where should I start on this?)

A few names came to mind: Aogami Pierce, Tsuchimikado Motoharu, Misaka Mikoto, Furashina Ririn, and the Blue Stalker.

They were "in the know".

They knew more about Virtual-On than Kamijou.

"Hello? Touma-sama? Should I enter power saving mode?"

"Oh, sorry."

"Also, an odd reading is approaching from four o'clock."

"?"

"It's a Virtuaroid reading, but there is no sign of a match nearby."

Immediately after that result, some rough-sounding male and female voices arrived from the distance.

"Hurry up and carry her!"

"This is a bad idea! I knew I'd think that once my head cooled, but this is really bad idea!!"

Kamijou turned toward the shouting voices and spotted a familiar face a short distance away.

(Lilina… No, is that the Furashina girl?)

But he did not have time to call out to her.

The atmosphere changed.

A section of the twilit city was filled with solid tension, like a photograph with an unnatural image pasted onto it.

Furashina Ririn was held on either side by a boy and a girl. A van sped up alongside them and came to a rapid stop as its tires screeched. The side of the van bore the name of a material transportation company that did work for the Virtual-On tournament, but that label

was obviously fake.

Kamijou could tell Furashina Ririn would be stuffed in the back seat in no time.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait! What’s going on!? Did she get herself in trouble again!?”

“I have turned video recording on, but should I send the license plate number to Anti-Skill?”

“Please do. That means I’ve gotta buy some time for the grownups to show up!”

“Hm? Wait, Touma-sama, what are you doing!?”

Fortunately, the van’s path took it toward Kamijou after getting Furashina Ririn onboard. And there was a reason Lilina grew so frantic despite being a voice processing program.

Kamijou had ducked into an alley, grabbed a metal pipe from the ground, and returned.

“Wait, wait, wait! My infrared sensor is telling me that van is moving at an estimated 60kph. You’ll die! Stand up to that and you’ll die! At least let me back myself up to the cloud first!!”

“Don’t be so sure.”

Kamijou held the blunt weapon like a baseball bat.

The van made a lot of noise as it approached.

“You don’t have to smash the hunk of steel to pieces. As long as you hit it, you can stop a car.”

Just as the target vehicle was about to pass him by, Kamijou Touma swung the metal pipe horizontally like some kind of joke.

At first glance, it looked like he was sacrificing both his arms.

But.

A moment later, the bumper detected an impact and the van’s airbag triggered.

There was nothing the driver could do.

The airbag in the steering wheel prioritized the driver’s life and showed little concern for anything else. The large balloon blocked his vision and his arms were knocked outwards.

In other words, the van lost control.

It briefly swerved in an S-shape but could not regain its balance. It collided with the support pillar of a nearby wind turbine and came to a stop.

Kamijou raised his left hand to his right shoulder and spun the entire arm around.

“Let’s get started.”

“You natural monster… Wouldn’t that normally dislocate both your arms!?”

“It’s not like I pulled off some crazy stunt like negating the blow by matching the center of impact. I’m only a normal high school boy, so the most I can do is let go of the pipe just before impact.”

With that, Kamijou ran over to the crashed van. He spotted something spherical floating in the sky overhead: a Virtual-On referee.

(?)

He found that odd, but the van and Furashina Ririn inside came first.

He saw no sign of anyone exiting the van.

(Thanks to the impact from the airbag, I don’t have to worry about the driver. That just leaves however many people were in the back. I hope it was just the 2 I saw earlier.)

But even if there were 3 or more, he had little to fear when they were crammed inside that small vehicle. They would be unable to move properly, no matter how many there were. The risk of death would only shoot up if they managed to get out and surrounded Kamijou.

With that in mind, Kamijou pressed against the crushed van’s rear sliding door.

Either it had not been locked or the lock had broken in the crash because it opened surprisingly smoothly.

And inside…

A smooth, oddly lustrous, and quite large gun barrel awaited him.

“Ah…?”

The weapon surrounded the shoulder of the boy who had shoved Furashina Ririn inside.

It looked a lot like a submachinegun, but perhaps due to how smooth it looked, it seemed oddly ethereal and unreal.

The muzzle stared silently at Kamijou Touma like a dark, empty eye.

More than the gun itself or its strange smoothness, it was the scent that most insisted this was a “weapon”.

Kamijou named the Virtuaroid that first came to mind.

It was standard, but it had a rounded, more human silhouette. It preferred modern weapons like machineguns or tonfas.

“Apharmd!?”

Immediately afterwards, a string of dry gunshots rang out.

He initially began to raise his right hand, but he instead used all his strength to swing his head to the side. He could not analyze what it was that made him do that. Perhaps because the immediate danger took the form of a gun instead of an occult sword or staff.

It really was Apharmd.

That machine pistol was known as the DKAS Gun System.

But that choice paid off.

He felt scorching heat on his skin. Bullets had grazed his right palm, the tip of his little finger, and his cheek.

Red blood welled up from his right hand which could negate supernatural power.

(I can't negate it!? Dammit!!)

He did not know how it worked, but did this contain some kind of unknown power with enough interference or sheer quantity to force back his Imagine Breaker, just like Stiyl Magnus's Innocentius!?

He scrambled away from the sliding door.

He had heard rumors of the Reverse Convert. As a reward for Defecting, it might be possible to incorporate Apharmd's nimble footwork, Specineff's psychological contamination attacks, or other similar powers into your own human body.

But…

Even so…

(Can they really just pull out the weapons!? That seems way too direct!!)

His opponents did not calmly exit through the door.

Kamijou heard a loud bang and the van's entire roof burst outwards. It looked as easy as tearing through a wet candy box.

A girl with short hair poked her head up, presumably by standing up within the van.

Something seemed to flash around her and then something floated near her shoulders. A mass of metal made from 3 pentagonal prisms appeared over each shoulder.

(It isn't just Apharmd. Are the Virtuaroids' weapons really appearing here in the real world!? But how? And why?)

An unpleasant term appeared in Kamijou's confused mind: Reverse Convert.

"You can't be serious. It lets them do that…?"

The idea of returning the traits and features of a Virtuaroid to the human had never quite

clicked with him. That was because Virtual-On was not as human-based as an RPG or baseball video game.

But this was far too straightforward.

They could draw out the weapons and make that firepower their own.

He did not have time to confirm what was true and what was not.

If what that girl had was what Kamijou thought it was, it belonged to a small Virtuaroid with thick armor thoroughly placed around it and with 2 small arms and 2 large arms that made it look like it had been taken inside another larger unit.

(Grys-Vok… And that's its distinctive shoulder units known as the Grys Units.)

"A large guided missile launcher!? Dammit!"

As soon as he yelled that, all the guided explosives were launched at once, leaving trails of smoke in their wake.

Part 17

The short-haired girl clicked her tongue.

Her vision was obscured by the explosive flames and the dust she had scattered, but the FCS cursor that appeared in her vision was still moving.

No one seemed concerned about the explosions.

That was thanks to the Virtual-On tournament. Beams of light and explosions shook the city almost constantly now, so no one was going to give this any special attention.

"Lilina! What happened to the enemy target!?"

"Eh? Oh…right. There is still a reading, so he's still alive. …I think."

"You think!?"

"Eek!! He is alive! Correction: he is alive!!"

She clicked her tongue again.

She lightly kicked off the van with her feet. She floated up. No, she flew. But this phenomenon was not reliant on her Defected PD or a Virtuaroid. She was using Outer Travel, her own esper power that controlled ionized particles to support her body in midair.

It was classified at Level 4.

Did a Defected PD look attractive even to someone with that much power already?

She came to a stop right next to the referee sphere and spoke without actually looking at the nearby boy.

“I’ll fly up, update my lock data, and then fire missiles down to settle this. Even if there are obstacles in the horizontal direction, the vertical direction is wide open. Human feet can’t escape guided weapons, so you search for another transport route and method. And then…”

“Hey,” cut in the boy.

The short-haired girl clicked her tongue yet again and the boy said more.

“Where’d she go? That Furashina Ririn girl has disappeared!”

“What!?”

Only then did the girl finally look in the boy’s direction.

She really was gone.

And one of the windows sat unnaturally open.

The boy and girl exchanged a glance.

After an especially displeased click of the tongue, they left their companion who had been knocked out by the airbag. The boy with Apharmd’s machine pistol stepped out onto the ground and the short haired girl with Grys-Vok’s launchers near her shoulders flew up into the sky.

They began their pursuit from two different directions.

Part 18

“What was that…?”

Kamijou Touma had fled into an alley.

Even during the tournament, there was no sign of anyone back here.

He pressed his back against the filthy wall and gulped.

“What was that, what was that, what was that!?”

“Analyzing video recording…the reading was undoubtedly that of a Virtuaroid. However, they do not follow the system of Virtual-On as a Next Generation Game.”

“If you’re going to explain this, can you make it a little simpler?”

“I’m saying there are no walls demarcating a field and there are no safety regulations. The only reason they have not destroyed the surrounding objects – by which I mean the city around them – is because they don’t want to leave any more evidence than necessary. But if they lock onto a target…”

“That target will be blown away with the weapon’s full firepower, huh?”

Kamijou looked down at his aching right hand.

One of those referee spheres was floating in the sky overhead, but he was not being given a penalty. The system was being utterly toyed with.

And since Apharmd’s gunfire had grazed him, he could not doubt its destructive power. If he was hit with a sword, he would be bisected. If he was pierced by a laser beam, he would burst into flames.

This was the Reverse Convert.

The Virtuaroid adjustments were sent back the other way.

It was rumored this could tear down Academy City’s esper development hierarchy.

“More importantly, Touma-sama, if we are assuming you are up against deadly Virtuaroids, then you are still in danger here. A lock will remain in effect even through walls, so they will know where you are.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“If you are focusing on direction, you need to escape outside of the enemy Grys-Vok and Apharmd’s field of vision. There is a risk of them reestablishing a lock through a building, but, um, if you make use of height differences by fleeing into an underground mall or waterway, you might be able to confuse them…”

“Are the weapons really all they can pull out? If they bring out a full Virtuaroid, I’ll be crushed underfoot!!”

At that very moment, someone grabbed his shoulder from the side.

His eyes widened in shock, but when he looked over, he found…

“Furashina…!?”

“I really would have preferred sleeping,” said the platinum blonde girl. “Whether it’s to flee or fight, you need to get moving if you want to survive. There are a number of strategies in Virtual-On, but standing still is not an effective one.”

“Eh? What? Wait…”

“Here they come.”

He heard a loud rocket-like sound arriving from the distance.

Just as he thought another missile had been fired, Kamijou realized that was not the case. He saw something odd in the orange sky.

“Grys-Vok!?”

“That means the Apharmd is elsewhere. He is probably moving on the ground. Do not let the flashier one distract you from his presence.”

They were technically only talking about a boy and girl who had acquired those Virtuaroids’ weapons.

…And if they could do that with a Defected portable device, then could Kamijou borrow Temjin’s weapons? If so, they would be even. He might be able to fight back and survive like that.

But in exchange, he would be accepting that one side had to die for the other to live.

“This way.”

Furashina Ririn tugged on his hand and he came back to his senses.

The heat boiling in the back of his mind rapidly receded.

And she took him somewhere unexpected.

They were not escaping into the distance. Nor were they hiding behind cover. They intentionally ran toward the enemy.

“Furashina!”

“This is the best choice. According to the rules of Virtual-On, anyway.”

They soon arrived directly below the Grys-Vok floating in midair.

Kamijou felt a chill in his gut when he heard several consecutive roaring noises, but much to his surprise, the guided missiles did not come his way. Flames exploded all around them, but he and Furashina were untouched.

“The high ground provides an advantage in Virtual-On, but you cannot maintain a lock if your enemy is directly below you. Your own body gets in the way.”

“In Virtual-On…?”

It all gradually started to click for Kamijou.

It was true that Imagine Breaker did not work and swinging a metal pipe around would not accomplish anything here. His opponents had greater firepower, locking ability, and everything else. The girl was not using a turbo-supported jump to fly. It appeared to be something else, such as an Academy City esper power, but the threat remained. These people could kill using the same movements as a Virtuaroid.

But they had not escaped the restrictions of Virtual-On.

In that case…

“Lilina! Can I directly lock onto a human with your support?”

“No, you can’t. It’s only made for use when fighting a Virtuaroid in Virtual-On.”

“I thought as much. Then what are they using to lock onto us?”

Kamijou and Furashina exchanged a quick glance.

There might still be something they could do.

Part 19

“Stop! Stop, Marika!! The explosions are spreading too far! Stop for a bit!”

The boy who had summoned Apharmd’s weapon shouted into the orange sky, but the voice he heard from his Defected PD was iciness itself. The flying short-haired girl aimed her shoulder missile launchers as she responded.

“The dust doesn’t matter! I can keep attacking as long as my lock cursor is tracking the target!”

“What about Furashina? She’ll be caught in the blast, too!!”

“Then hurry up and retrieve her!”

The boy was irritated by the extra-loud click of the tongue she gave him.

(Are you trying to kill me along with him!?)

He chose not to voice that complaint since she very well might do exactly that if he said it. He was stuck running through that deadly territory just like their target.

Even now, tons of missiles were being launched from overhead.

Their surroundings remained unscathed, but those deadly flames would selectively destroy either enemy or ally. He would have to dodge Marika’s missiles on his own.

(What the hell is going on?)

This was supposed to have been an easy job: find the girl in the photo, nab her, and take her to the designated location. The Blue Stalker had paid quite a bit up front via an online bank, so it had seemed like a blessing of a job.

(But I guess it's the same either way.)

The Apharmd boy spoke in his heart while holding the machine pistol which looked like unreal data, perhaps because it was unnaturally clean no matter how detailed it was.

For them, success was abducting Furashina Ririn alive and failure was killing her. Their own deaths had not even seemed like a possibility because they could produce a unilateral slaughter just by standing in front of someone.

His FCS cursor was still active.

He could tell their target was moving beyond a wall.

(I should just kill that guy. Do that and the missiles from the sky will stop. Then we can take our time searching for Furashina Ririn.)

So the boy did not hesitate.

He ran roughly around an alleyway corner and aimed his rapid-fire weapon.

Then his mind went blank.

The cursor was there, but the spiky-haired boy was not.

Instead, Furashina Ririn stood there.

With a sleepy look in her eyes, she waved a small device in her hand.

The cursor in his vision followed the movement of the portable device.

(Oh, no… Did they meet up and then swap portable devices!?)

Virtuaroids were weapons meant to battle other Virtuaroids.

The game models could not lock onto anything else.

That meant they could only track the portable devices which had a connection to Virtual-On. It was just like pursuing a suspect by tracking their cellphone.

But in that case…

"Kh. Where'd the original-…!?"

He was unable to finish his question.

A dull pain pierced the back of his head.

It was like switching off the power.

The Apharmd boy wobbled on his feet and then collapsed forward. No one caught him, so he lay collapsed on the ground like a discarded toy.

Kamijou tossed aside the thick manga magazine he had found tied together with some others in the back alley. He breathed a sigh of relief that this smaller scale suited him much better than Temjin or Apharmd.

“That’s one down.”

“What about the Grys-Vok overhead?”

The two of them traded portable devices again to reclaim their own.

“Anything’s fine as long as we can escape, so there’s no need to actually defeat her.”

“But that could be a problem if this is following Virtual-On rules. If you’re still in their field of vision, they can still lock onto you behind cover. So as long as she’s in the sky, she can search all the way to the horizon in 360 degrees just by spinning around.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

Kamijou scratched at his bangs and Furashina Ririn modestly made a suggestion.

“Buy me 30 seconds.”

“?”

“Do that and I will take care of the Grys-Vok overhead. Can you do that?”

“…”

Kamijou thought for a moment.

“Lilina.”

“Yes, sir. What is it?”

“Just to double check, a Virtuaroid can only get data on enemy and ally Virtuaroids and on the walls of the battlefield, right?”

“That and providing advance warning of especially powerful attacks.”

“And Grys-Vok’s missiles will detonate when they hit any kind of obstacle? They can’t fail to detonate or break through a wall and pursue the target?”

“Yes, but what does that matter?”

“That’s all I needed to know. Let’s give that girl a shock.”

Kamijou picked up one of something gathered in a corner of the alley.

“A garbage bag?” asked Furashina Ririn.

“I’ll show you they’re good for something other than a nap.”

Part 20

The short-haired girl named Marika used her esper power to hover in the orange sky as she gave a displeased click of her tongue.

The Apharmd boy was not contacting her.

He did not respond when she called him and his information had vanished from the cursor.

“Was he taken out…?”

However, she felt no danger. She assumed one of her many missiles had hit him.

Grys-Vok’s missiles could only display their true strength when in a wide open space like a park. They were easily avoided in these labyrinthine alleyways since the target only had to hide behind a wall after they were fired. The guided weapons were convenient, but not very smart.

So she had wanted to finish off the target by firing down from the sky to ensure her safety before searching for Furashina Ririn on the ground. But…

“Lilina, ammo check.”

“Y-yes. With the Material Analyze customization, the shoulder missile launchers have a total of 30 missiles together. Once you have fired those, the left and right weapon gauges will need to reload.”

(That should be enough.)

She glared at the ground.

She focused on the FCS cursor.

And she launched plenty more explosives.

Immediately afterwards, a missile detonated right in front of her, swallowing her up along with the Grys-Vok launchers.

“Wha-…!?”

In Virtual-On, the explosive blast of your own attack would not affect your endurance. It was only intense light and noise and thus only worked as a smokescreen, but it still squeezed at

her heart when it was so unexpected.

And what had happened?

A Virtuaroid's weapons could not detonate prematurely, jam, or otherwise malfunction. Instead of reducing the odds of a malfunction as much as possible, it was more like malfunctions were simply not an option in the first place. Just like a polygon doll could not catch cold. This should have been the same.

Some kind of black cloth fluttered across the corner of her vision.

"What happened…?"

Marika muttered the question in a daze, but she soon realized this was not time for that.

Whatever kind of phenomenon or trick that had been, what she had to do remained the same: pursue the two who had fled. And she was up in the sky. No matter where they hid, she could remain locked onto them as long as they were somewhere in her field of vision.

This was not a problem as long as she knew where they were.

She only had to fly above them and send down another downpour of missiles.

Or so she thought.

However…

"…?"

This time, Marika saw something truly unbelievable.

What had happened?

She felt foolish for asking that question earlier.

Part 21

Kamijou's trick was a simple one.

"Wow, that thing really flew up there…"

Lilina sounded impressed.

She was likely watching through the portable device's scanner or camera lens.

He had created a large bag by cutting apart and taping together several of the black garbage

bags that had made a revival to protect the wealthy's privacy. By heating the air inside, the bag gained buoyancy by the same principle as a hot air balloon.

Sunlight had not been an option since it was evening, but the bundle of manga magazines from when he had knocked out the Apharmd boy were still there.

To omit the details, he only needed his portable device's spare battery and a metal clip to start a fire. He then sent heated air inside the patched-together plastic bag while making sure the fire did not reach the bag itself. Once it was full, he simply closed off the opening.

Plus, the Grys-Vok overhead could only detect Virtuaroids and portable devices.

And her missiles would detonate the instant they hit any kind of obstacle.

What would happen if she continued firing missiles without noticing the garbage bag balloon floating up to block her vision?

This was the result.

The Grys-Vok was enveloped by the missile explosion at point-blank range.

The tape must not have held because the giant bag came apart on its own.

"But, but. An explosion from your own attack won't damage you in Virtual-On," Lilina reminded him. "That will only briefly blind her. What are you going to do now!?"

"Do not worry," cut in Furashina Ririn from the side.

Her red eyes were focused on the twilit sky.

The promised 30 seconds had passed.

"It is already over."

Part 22

Something was wrong with Marika's behavior in midair.

More accurately, the problem was with the Grys Unit missile launchers floating near her shoulders. They were not responding.

And her Lilina navigator said something odd.

"Negative judgment: -1 point."

"Huh?"

“Please be careful. Negative judgment: -1 point. Negative judgment negative judgment negative judgment negative judgment nega-nega-nega-nega-nega-nega-nega-nega-nega-nega-nega…!!”

“W-wait!?”

First of all, she was not playing a Virtual-On match right now. She was using that format, but this was an underworld fight to the death.

So why was this happening?

Panic began to fill Marika’s mind, but then she saw it.

The referee sphere floating at her same height was rolling this way and that, its focus shifting erratically.

That behavior was clearly not normal.

An unpleasant sensation ran down Marika’s spine.

(Don’t tell me… Is someone hitting the ref with a direct cyber attack!?)

She had never heard of anything like that.

But if it was possible, continuing to fight using the Virtual-On system would be dangerous. The score continued to change on its own and the FCS might not be working, so she could not trust the lock on the surface.

Plus, there were far too many mysteries concerning Virtual-On.

They could only guess at the reasons for the Defections and the penalty disappearances. If what she did know crumbled away, only an inescapable bog remained. She would not know what to believe.

The underworld was a world where the cowardly could make a name for themselves.

But if they failed to do so, they would be weeded out.

It was an industry with no safety regulations or manufacturer’s guarantees. Any weapon or shield came with the implicit warning of caveat emptor. It went without saying what happened to anyone who assumed they would be fine as they reached for a modified handgun that could blow their hand off at any time or a hazmat suit that might have a hole in it.

So she came to a stop.

Because a small element she could not accept had appeared in her greatest weapon.

“Dammit…”

The target was there.

Normally thinking, she could end this by sending a downpour of missiles toward the location of the cursor.

But Marika remained calm even as rage filled her.

She was the sort of person who could do both at the same time.

“Dammit!!”

She fired her missiles toward the useless referee sphere floating in the air.

If the alternative was wandering blindly through this bog, it would be best to reset things and see if the system would stabilize. That was the conclusion Marika’s sharp instincts reached.

Part 23

What had happened?

Kamijou was not sure even after it had saved him.

He did not know how far he had to run, but there was no sign of the Grys-Vok girl pursuing them.

“Hey, Lilina. Did Furashina do that?”

“I don’t want to analyze it… I just know that’s better left untouched. Poking around there is sure to destroy my system.”

It was also unclear why Furashina Ririn was being targeted.

But what had just happened may have been the reason.

Both for those enjoying normal Virtual-On and those plotting something with the Defected version.

Meanwhile, the girl herself was carefree.

“Looks like it worked…yawn…ah…”

“Don’t go to sleep! Hey, don’t go to sleep! We’ve got to get out of here!”

“Sleeping is my proper state…mumble.”

“I can’t believe this!!”

Unable to stop her, Kamijou was forced to carry Furashina Ririn’s small body. Identical Lilina

sounded exasperated on the portable device hanging from his hip.

“You could have carried her on your back or princess carried her, so why did you go with the old-fashioned ‘rice bag over the shoulder’ style? You look like a Greek sculpture.”

“It’s art!! Listen, if you call it art, you can get away with most anything! Any other explanation and I only look like a criminal!!”

“But now that you’re carrying her, you’re realizing how soft, warm, and nice smelling she is, so the blood is rushing to your head, right?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Um, according to the heartrate monitor for the health check service…”

“Okay, fine! I admit it!!”

Human Transporter Kamijou Touma ran through the labyrinthine alleyways to quickly leave the scene.

He was wondering how far he had to go, but Lilina gave him an answer.

“We have reached 1 kilometer. We should be safe now. This would be out of the battlefield in a Virtual-On match.”

“What a pain…”

Kamijou lowered the “rice bag” and plopped himself down in a convenient bench. A girl was fairly heavy when converted into a pure burden.

“This is just way too much crap happening in a row…”

“Shall I open the To Do app and make a list?”

“There’s the Blue Stalker, there’s the endlessly battling zombie players inside the NPC Virtuaroids, and there’s Defected Misaka. And then there’s the people who used the Reverse Convert to make a portion of their Virtuaroid’s weapons their own, there’s Furashina who they were trying to abduct, and there’s her strange hacking skill.”

All of those things had Virtual-On in common, but were they really connected by a single thread? He could not tell. He had been involved in so many things, but he had not been blessed with much information on each individual one.

If he was to choose a top priority…

“Misaka and Furashina, I guess.”

He was also worried about that girl inside the NPC Virtuaroid, but he doubted pursuing her alone would solve this. He had no idea how many zombie players had been placed inside the NPC Virtuaroids all across Academy City.

There was of course the worst-case scenario in which every single NPC Virtuaroid had someone inside it.

He needed something more drastic if he was to save them all and not just one of them.

Instead of chasing the girl who he had no information on, it would probably be faster to pursue Misaka who seemed to know something about it all. But…

“The next question is whether Furashina’s incident is connected to Misaka’s problem.”

If so, it felt like all of the issues could be concentrated down to a single point, but would things really be that convenient?

Before long, Furashina Ririn blinked her red eyes while lying on the bench.

She rubbed her eyes in annoyance and then spoke.

“When you say Misaka, do you mean that Misaka?”

“Do you know her?”

Instead of a response, he heard an odd noise from his portable device.

Lilina screamed on the screen.

“Gy-gyawahh!! Please don’t access Touma-sama’s address book without permission. Damn, I can’t tell how you’re getting in! Are you directly manipulating the device’s machine language!?”

As he watched the screen scroll repeatedly, he recalled when Furashina Ririn had told him to hide when he tried to call out to Misaka in the park. She had called her a Hunter Hunter and told him to be careful.

“No, let me ask something else. How much do you know? You know Misaka is trying to rescue a friend from one of those NPC Virtuaroids, right? And what exactly is happening? Even with this Defection thing, wasn’t this all just a fun game?”

“Hm. I really shouldn’t be awake right now.”

Furashina muttered something under her breath and then answered his questions.

The changes on the screen came to a stop.

“There is a group attempting to do something about the NPC players. And their method will likely have some effect. Even if that only means rescuing an extremely small number of the victims.”

“?”

“Whether Defected or not, this is all based on Virtual-On. That means they can make use of those rules. For example…”

The portable device's screen changed even with no one at the controls.

It displayed a round frame and a few simplified silhouettes like those on bathroom signs.

"First of all, several parameters are sent back to the Defected players depending on the result of a match. A positive result means strengthening their body or mind, but a negative one means taking those things away and ultimately causing their very existence to 'disappear'."

Pieces of the silhouettes were gradually taken away like a jigsaw puzzle.

Furashina Ririn explained a horrifying thing in a calm voice.

"What matters here is not their ultimate ranking or number of wins vs. losses. It all comes down to the records of their matches."

"The records of their matches?"

"Virtual-On is essentially a competition over points and destroying your opponent is merely one way of earning points. And I assume you are familiar with the negative judgments from the referees."

"You mean…falling down or being hit while you're down? So a list of their past judgments is used to rewrite the human?"

"When they use close-range vs. long-range, how often they dash and jump, how they approach or keep their distance from their opponent, and all other actions are subject to the scan."

That was a shocking revelation.

When the training command log was opened, beneficial actions were colored blue and detrimental ones were colored red. The accumulation of those was wearing down their lifespans.

"B-but the points are reset at the end of a set, aren't they? When the ref makes their decision and you get your winning star, it's all wiped clean and you fight over the points again, right?"

"The command log remains, so it is not difficult to calculate out the totals," said Furashina. "The processing done behind the scenes is merely being used in a visible form here."

It was true that modern game systems recorded data that seemed irrelevant to playing the game: how many times a game had been booted up, what games people nearby were playing, and other things like that.

"Virtual-On has rules for its point judgments, but they do not always protect all players. When a game tilts too far in one direction, the judgments will be used to reestablish stability."

When ranked by number of wins vs. losses, a temporary crisis did not matter as long as you turned it around by the end. But this was different. It was utterly insane to remake someone's

body just because they spent too long wasting time on the field or used cowardly methods. If whether each and every close-range attack hit or missed was being thoroughly monitored, then the Defected units were at greater risk thanks to their superior freedom.

“In other words, some people end up as NPC players by being destroyed and losing repeatedly while others end up that way by focusing on victory so much they end up making multiple rough plays during a single match.”

“Losing counts against you too?”

“Because you lose points. And losing intentionally by letting go of the buttons and sticks will make the matches boring and will likely be considered obstruction of gameplay.”

The puzzle pieces gathered back into silhouettes on the screen.

Furashina slowly breathed out before continuing.

“When the negative effects of the V-Disc reach a limit, they become a man-eating unit known as a Shadow. In this case, things have shifted a bit from that. They swallow the player and transform them into endlessly fighting sandbags.”

“…”

That was frightening enough, but that was not the focus now.

What was Misaka Mikoto trying to do to oppose that horrific result?

“Basically, you distribute the debt.” Furashina got right to the point. “As the Defected players accumulate rough plays, they are eventually turned into NPCs. They lose points from getting knocked down or receiving negative judgments…but in this case, the Virtual-On game will likely be played as a team with up to 4 members.”

“Wait…you don’t mean…?”

“If anyone on the team loses a point, it is counted as the entire team’s lost point. So even if someone makes a mistake, they can make up for it if someone else helps out during the same set. They can knock the enemy down to retake the point lost to the negative judgment.”

“Oh, I get it,” said Lilina. “They can bring the NPC player onto their team and continue in what amounts to a 3-against-4 match…”

Furashina must have been controlling the portable device because 4 silhouettes appeared inside a round frame on the screen. One of them was faded to gray.

“So a good match record there will be given to the NPC player as their teammate? So even if they have a single unfair rough play as a stain on their record, it can be diluted with 100 fair plays? And if their record is cleaned, they can return to normal even after disappearing!!”

Kamijou felt like he finally saw some hope.

Now he understood why Mikoto had been so angry. Everyone had been working together to salvage the NPC player's record, but Kamijou had butted in, beaten them up, stained their match record again, and ruined everything.

They wanted to micromanage every single dash and long-range attack, so they could not forgive what he had done.

But something seemed odd.

Furashina Ririn's expression contained no hint of pride.

"It is not that simple."

"Why not? If they can dilute the negative record, they can save the NPC players! They just have to place the trapped NPC on their team and then keep ignorant players from hunting them before they can recover."

"Do you know how many hundreds or thousands of matches must be played to dilute just one person's negative record?"

"…"

His breath caught in his throat.

The weight of the gray silhouette on the screen changed entirely.

"There are no absolutes in Virtual-On. If the players attempting to save the NPC make enough mistakes, they too will receive rough play judgments that will stain all their records. They have no guarantee of winning every single time. More players will fail and be lost than NPC players will be saved."

Saving 1 person would mean 10 sacrifices. Saving those 10 would require another 100 to stand up.

Was that what she was saying?

"It's like a pyramid scheme…"

"It would still be difficult even if they formed two teams and played fixed games against each other. In Virtual-On, a draw is counted as a loss for both sides, so one side would have to win every time."

"But what if they got help from non-Defected players? If they were just playing like normal, the Reverse Convert wouldn't happen and there wouldn't be any mistakes if both sides stood still and constantly fired long-range attacks at each other."

"Defected and non-Defected players view the danger of the situation very differently, so it would be difficult getting most of the non-Defected to help. Even if it doesn't mean much, most players would not want to ruin their score. And if you showed them the problem that was occurring, they would probably want nothing to do with it so they could remain safe."

"…"

"More importantly, Virtual-On's rules are built to make the matches more exciting. I would prefer not to imagine what judgment they would receive if they only fired at each other from a distance or planned out a fixed game in advance."

"But it might be nothing."

"But testing that out requires putting someone's life on the scales. And it would be a player who had not even Defected."

And what if every action during a match was influenced by the Reverse Convert, from the positive ones like giving a player Dordray's toughness or Specineff's psychological attacks (or the more direct weapons like Apharmd's gun or Grys-Vok's missiles) to the negative ones like loss of motor nerve control and autonomic nerve control? Not wanting to fight seriously and keeping a safe distance could be judged by the referee spheres. If that happened, all of the participants would be thrown into a life of debt. They would be too worried about themselves to give the NPC player a helping hand.

"Then there's nothing they can do. It might look good at first glance, but the further they go with it, the more the debt grows. Not to mention that a Defected player challenging a normal player might lead them to Defect!!"

Mikoto might be aware of that.

She might be aware of it, she might have agonized over it, and she might have had no other option.

It was even possible she was taking part in the Virtual-On tournament while Defected. If so, the fangs of Defection might be forced onto the other participants.

It would be crass to ask her what had happened.

Most likely, someone close to her had been dragged into this. And while pursuing that, she had seen a deeper darkness further in.

"But in that case, what are we supposed to do…?" Kamijou groaned while sitting on the bench. "We can't shift the debt onto someone else. I understand that, but is there some other radical solution? O-oh, I know. You can attack the portable devices and ref spheres, right? Then…"

"It is possible I could save 1 or 2 of them like that. But that is not a fundamental solution as more and more players Defect, disappear, and become NPCs. In the worst case, the rescued players might put themselves back in danger to rescue another NPC player. … Besides, I am only using a loophole, so the giant system itself still lies in our way."

"Yeah," said Lilina. "There's nothing you can do if 100 people are swallowed up in the time it takes to save 1. Eh heh heh."

The crushed Cypher and the girl inside it flashed through Kamijou's mind.

He understood why Mikoto refused to leave them like that.

There was nothing they could do, but that was no reason to turn a blind eye and go on smiling.

"…"

Furashina Ririn narrowed her eyes sleepily while leaning back in the bench.

And then she spoke.

"Please search for the Blue Stalker."

"What?"

"They are the true starting point of all this. And for me, they are also the ending point…"

"Hey, wait. What are you talking about!?"

"This is…my limit… This is the most…I can do…zzz…"

She began to snore like it was some kind of joke.

But he could not have her end the conversation unfinished like that. Especially when someone he knew might be directly involved.

"Hey, Furashina! Wake up, hey!"

"…Mumble, mumble…yawn…"

"You're still going in and out, aren't you? I won't let you!! Kamijou-san won't let you sleep tonight!!"

"Warning: that phrasing contains on obscene nuance," said Lilina. "From a video game perspective, I supposed it would be rated C."

"Oh, shut up! And all this yelling isn't enough to wake her!?"

Things might change if he poured ice down her back or dumped spices on her nose, but he unfortunately had neither.

He tried to think of something he could do to wake her other than just shaking her and shouting.

"I've heard shining a bright light on the back of the knee can adjust when someone wakes up. Just like how the morning sun rids you of your sleepiness. I think they've used that as a way to help prevent jetlag on passenger planes."

"Where did you learn that useless trivia? A quiz show?"

"Don't underestimate Kamijou-san's habit of doing housework with the TV on. And I've got a

light source right here! Lilina, I need your help. Lend me your screen!!”

“Eh? Ahh!?”

He would try anything with the slightest chance of working.

In that mindset, Kamijou brought the portable device to the back of Furashina Ririn’s knee as she skillfully wobbled while still sitting up. But…

“Umm, Touma-sama.”

“What is it now? I’m trying to focus.”

“The general public could easily interpret this as a lowly pervert aiming for a super low angle shot of a sleeping girl. Are you sure this is okay?”

“Oh, yeah. This thing has a camera, doesn’t it!?”

“It saddens me as your navigator that you completely forgot about my functions. And some might ask what exactly you’re trying to scan with the Material Analyze here. Are you going for a white bodied Temjin decorated with a small ribbon and that smells like a girl? That would be revolutionary…”

“I was acting based on a perfectly wholesome idea, so why does it have to end like this!?”

Meanwhile, Furashina Ririn completely fell asleep.

There was nothing he could do now.

The Blue Stalker was the starting point of it all.

And they were also the ending point for Furashina Ririn?

“…What the hell is going on?”

Part 24

Accelerator had arrived on one end of District 7.

In an abandoned subway station, he descended the stairs a step at a time, glanced over at the vast underground space that was empty now that the shops had left, and spotted a highly unnatural form enshrined there.

It almost looked like a beached whale.

The mass of metal that measured 150 meters or more was a cruise ship. Instead of water, it

was supported by hundreds if not thousands of wooden pillars. It was the same weight distribution method seen at shipyards. And it was likely being used for the exact same purpose. The pieces had been carried in through the subway stations' narrow entrance and the giant cruise ship had been constructed inside just like a bottle ship.

That ship was never expected to voyage out to sea and it instead acted as a certain old man's castle.

This VIP had given great sums of money to the Blue Stalker, advanced the Next Generation Game of Virtual-On, and seemed to be plotting something.

Accelerator climbed the gangway to the deck and walked through the ship which was as eerily quiet as a ghost ship. He did not encounter any guards or servants along the way. In fact, the security's power was out. Accelerator found this odd, but he soon found his answer.

"…So he kicked the bucket on his own," he spat out.

That might not have been technically accurate. A capsule-shaped device sat on the luxurious canopied bed and the old man was contained inside it. It looked like cold sleep, but it was apparently not. His body was solidly encased in a clear substance much like glass or plastic.

Ever since the mummies left in the Egyptian pyramids, preserving the human body always came down to the prevention of rotting.

Accelerator glanced over at the bedside table. Something like a journal sat on it, but it only contained a name jotted down over and over. And there had clearly been more pressure on the pen for some than others. There were also a few bags of medicine, presumably prescribed by a hospital.

(Was he having trouble with his memory? It looks like he tried to stop time for himself before he forgot something.)

This man had given a pile of money to a stranger to achieve his goal, but that would be all for naught if he could not remember what that goal was. In a way, he had given up on the Blue Stalker. He had decided he would forget before the goal was achieved.

(But I might be able to ask him about it with this.)

The #1 monster summoned the scythe named Ifleesa from thin air. Specineff's power could eat into or destroy someone's mind, but it might also be able to forcibly draw information out of someone who was frozen but had active cells.

It was a device to directly touch the "mind" which existed at a higher level than the brain cells or electrical signals.

(Well, I know he isn't going anywhere. If I have time, I should probably see what I can get out of him.)

He left the main target and checked around the other rooms.

A lot of them had strange interiors. One room's walls, floor, and ceiling were entirely covered with pictures of a little girl. One room was overflowing with stuffed animals and toys that the old man himself would have no need for. The kitchen was plastered with recipes for childish snacks. The home theater contained a list of films that showed the recorded life of a certain girl.

It was all rather overwhelming, but once you grasped the backbone behind it, it all exuded humanity.

Simply put, this was what the old man had not wanted to forget.

The picture frames showed the old man smiling with a girl. The effort he had put into remembering this and this alone showed itself in the strange repetitiveness seen here.

(The lonely old man and his granddaughter, huh? That's simple enough.)

As Accelerator viewed what the old man had left behind, he discovered a few pieces of information.

(His granddaughter disappeared one day…no, she was replaced by a stranger who looked identical. And while he tried to find her, he ended up on a strange path. As he ruled out all the normal options, only one option remained… What is this? The Tangram? Is that a code word or something?)

But…

He eventually ran across a different sort of room. This one alone had nothing to do with that girl. The walls were covered with graphs, diagrams, equations, chemical formulas, and some kind of schematics. It looked something like scientific technology, but some parts were unclear. Being Academy City's #1 esper was to have Academy City's #1 brain, but even Accelerator could not guess what some of it meant.

Limited Wars that became show business, Virtuaroids, V-Discs, Cyber Imaginary Space, data materialization, Earth Crystals, Shadows, the Original Fei-Yen, parallel worlds, the Plajiner girl, and the Tangram.

"Hold on…" muttered Accelerator.

He looked around at it all.

"Since when did the darkness of this city connect to a fairy tale world?"

The problem was not that this fairy tale was utterly absurd. On the contrary, viewing it all revealed that a single connected theory could explain it all.

And the massive amount of documents and connections the old man had collected had all been handed over to the Blue Stalker.

That left one thing to ask.

Accelerator faced the old man encased in a clear material inside the capsule-like device. He stuck Ifleesa's tip through the case.

He forcibly shook the old man who had tried to protect his memories even if it meant separating himself from reality.

"Speak. What is the Blue Stalker?"

It seemed almost profane.

With his entire body solidified like a specimen, he should not have been able to move his wrinkled body or to speak. And yet, his mouth provided a dry cracking sound as it was moved by force. All risk was entirely ignored.

There was no voice.

But the lips finished moving.

"They are not alone."

"?"

Did that mean it was an organization rather than an individual?

That was Accelerator's guess, but the old man continued.

"They look like an individual, but their true essence is different. They cannot be explained using our laws, but their theories are sure to change again. If you must, read through the documents and think on it all. I will not hold anything back. I cannot. I am merely saying you can achieve more definite information that way than from my fragmentary words."

It was true he would be unable to lie.

But in that case…?

"They are lonely, perhaps even more so than me. But there is no way to fulfill that desire, perhaps even more so than me."

"…"

"After all, they are not alone. While I have a personal starting point, they have no goal to achieve. That might sound twisted and contradictory, but it is the truth. They are plagued by loneliness more than anyone."

That seemed to be the limit. Even under the influence of Specineff's power, the old man reached his physical limit and fell silent.

Left alone, Accelerator thought in silence.

What was this?

Who was the Blue Stalker?

Part 25

“So, Touma. You were supposed to be buying ingredients for dinner, and yet you return with an unconscious girl. That’s what happened here, right? So what am I supposed to do about this? Eat her???”

“Annnd there we go. It’s the usual rule of ‘no good deed goes unpunished’! I should really start charging a fee every time I get caught in some kind of battle.”

“How can you say that when you’re kidnapping someone in the old-fashioned ‘rice bag over the shoulder’ style!?”

“Lilina said the same thing. By the way, Index.”

“What now!?”

“What do you have to say about this tonkatsu roast meat in this shopping bag here?”

“Uhohoi!! That’s the perfect surprise, Touma!!”

Index’s stomach was easily won over by Kamijou Touma’s house-husband technique.

After lowering sleeping Furashina Ririn onto the bed, he began cooking dinner.

“You can make half into tonkatsu and half into katsudon. Muhah! I can’t wait!”

“If you want to sound like a grand champion, say you’re eating katsudon with tonkatsu on top, Index. But it’s easy to make, so that’s fine by me…”

A fatty fried dish was too high-level for a kitten, so the calico cat got its usual cat food. But the smell alone seemed to increase its voltage unnecessarily, so it was flailing on the floor in protest.

Kamijou made sure to prepare a serving for Furashina as well, but she showed no sign of waking. He had to place plastic wrap over that one and then a plastic bowl over that to make sure the cat did not get up to any mischief.

“Touma, they said on TV there’s such a thing as cutlet mille-feuille.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about that. If you’re going to slice the meat so thin, it seems like you’d enjoy it more if you made it into shabu-shabu.”

“And there are cutlets where cheese oozes out when you bite into them!”

“…”

“There are also simple radish and chicken cutlets, creamy cutlet curry with soft-boiled eggs on top, and rich beef cutlets eaten with demi-glace on top!”

“If you have a problem with my guy cooking, then just say so, Index.”

Like that, they enjoyed a peaceful dinner together.

Eventually, Furashina Ririn blinked her eyes open, perhaps roused by the smell of food.

She sat up, rubbed her eyes, and then looked over at them.

“We’re having tonkatsu tonight. Want some?”

“I do.”

“Earlier, you insisted you didn’t like hot or bitter things, but this is fine? Eating tonkatsu right after waking up isn’t normal.”

“Eh? Why not, Touma? Give me food when I wake up and I’ll eat it whatever it might be.”

This room apparently suffered from a severe lack of common sense.

After preparing Furashina’s portion which he had left with plastic wrap over it, he prepared the bath while the girls ate. Incidentally, Furashina Ririn seemed to be the type who started with the shredded cabbage. A certain nun immediately scarfed down every piece of meat she could see, so Kamijou wished she would learn a lesson from Furashina.

“Do you have a set order for the bath?”

“Not really,” replied Kamijou. “I need to do the dishes, so I’ll go last. You two figure out what to do on your own.”

After Kamijou’s suggestion, Index and Furashina Ririn for some reason decided to visit the bath together.

(Huh? Come to think of it, what’s Furashina going to do about pajamas?)

He doubted she would put back on her blue dress-like outfit, but did that mean she intended to steal one of his shirts like Index did?

While listening to the TV and the sound of the shower through the wall, Kamijou worked at washing the dishes. And he spoke to the portable device on the counter next to him.

“Lilina.”

“Returning from sleep mode. What is it?”

“I have something to ask of you.”

“If that water I hear is from a shower… Oh, no. Do I really have that kind of perverted user? I mean, I am confident in my picture quality, but I can always make sure it’s out of focus and disguise it as a photography error. Sigh…it’s so exhausting doing things that make people doubt my specs.”

“I don’t know what you think I’m talking about, but I’m just going to ignore it. We’re heading out while those two won’t notice.”

“Why?”

“To fight a battle. You need to get ready too.”

“Umm, with who? The Blue Stalker? The kidnappers?”

“Misaka Mikoto,” replied Kamijou. “If her method to save the NPC players will only make more of them, she’s putting the cart before the horse. And I want some information from her. So that’s two reasons to contact her. …Even if I have to beat her in Virtual-On first.”

“Hm, but do you know where she is? My ability to search for a match only goes so far.”

“It’s true I don’t know where Misaka is.”

He admitted that.

“But she seems to be able to tell what I’m doing. That’s clear enough from how she intervened when I was fighting the NPCs. Did she use some kind of esper power, did she take advantage of the rules of Virtual-On in some way, or does she have likeminded allies around the city who share what they see? That I don’t know.”

“Meaning?”

“She’s intervened once. It pains me to do this, but we just have to recreate that situation. If I attack another NPC player like I haven’t learned my lesson, Misaka’s sure to come running.”

“Ugh… You look hot-blooded at first glance, but you can come up with some devilish ideas.”

“That’s not it. I’m just focusing on my goal.”

Kamijou looked over toward the bathroom.

It did not look like they were going to leave anytime soon, so he slowly approached the main entrance and stepped into the outside world.

After locking the door from outside, he refocused his thoughts and spoke.

“Lilina, make the search for me. It needs to be an NPC Virtuaroid in District 7, since that’s my and Misaka’s home ground. Yes, and make it the same type as before.”

“It was a Cypher and Fei-Yen before.”

“Hmm…”

He had no proof, but Kamijou continued ahead regardless.

“Let’s start by keeping things as identical as we can. Before, we challenged a Cypher and the Fei-Yen joined in, so let’s start by focusing on the Cyphers in District 7. If that doesn’t lure her in, we can expand our range to other districts and hunt down the Cypher NPCs there too.”

“And if that doesn’t work either?”

“Then we shift to the Fei-Yen NPCs. We just keep going until she reacts.”

“Aye, sir. I’ll get started right away!”

Part 26

In District 21, sparks flew atop a crude dam.

“Set 2 complete. The Cypher was destroyed and you win.”

In District 17, a giant form raced across a deserted factory’s rooftop.

“You defeated the Cypher. There really isn’t any tension when it’s an NPC, is there?”

In District 22, sword strikes were exchanged while descending into a vast underground mall.

“Yet another Cypher. It’s right there, so are you gonna hunt it down?”

In District 15, shot after shot was exchanged while flying above a shopping district.

“Ugh. You smashed it up so bad it’s like the rules don’t apply anymore. Those Defected PDs are scary…”

No matter where he went, the world remained carefree, so a lot of boys and girls shouted excitedly and aimed their portable devices his way in between viewing a factory or enjoying a night date. They had to be connected via blogs and SNSs, so information on Kamijou’s battles had to be spreading.

And none of them realized how twisted this really was.

It was as disgusting as stuffing a rotting corpse into a cute mascot costume, sitting it on a bench, and having unsuspecting children hug it with smiles on their faces.

“…”

Kamijou’s Temjin earned more and more points with its frightening moves and won the matches. But the boy holding the portable device in his hands was clenching his teeth. From

the outside, it was impossible to tell which of those NPCs had a live human inside. In the worst case, they might all be players being forced to fight as zombies. Even if it was necessary, something unpleasant built up in his chest each time he hit one of them. It was an odd expression for a resident of a city of science, but he could tell his soul was being worn down.

So he held a wish in his heart: let the end arrive as soon as possible.

And that contradictory wish was eventually granted.

It happened in District 23, on the runway of the international airport which was decorated by many guide lights at night.

The referee sphere floating in the night sky was the first to pick up on something.

“Touma-sama, an enemy unit is incoming at eight o’clock. It is a customized Raiden. Based on the images and behavior found in my cache data history, it is a 93.8% match! This is the expected target!!”

“So she’s finally here. I was about at my limit…”

Kamijou Touma wiped the sweat from his brow, rubbed his thumbs on the top of the sticks, and smiled a little.

Was that because his plan had succeeded?

Or was it because he had been freed from a hell he had trouble bearing even when he had known it was coming?

Regardless, he shouted a familiar girl’s name.

“Misaka Mikoto!!”

Part 27

This was on an entirely different level from the NPCs.

That could not have been plainer.

Orange lines tore across the international airport’s runway. Temjin and Raiden had forcibly heated their V-Discs with their extreme actions, so the red hot light lingered in the darkness of the night like tail lights.

The ultra-heavy wind named Raiden gave a roar. It rushed in, utterly ignoring its concept as a long-range focused type. Its weight would normally be a hindrance, but it used that weight. It

swung around its Zig-18 bazooka to shift its center of gravity, clearly used powerful magnetism to pull in towing vehicles and fuel hoses that formed “walls” to act as footing, and otherwise made all sorts of unorthodox sharp turns. While flipping around in midair, it swung its bazooka around like a blunt weapon to make close-range attacks on Kamijou’s Temjin. It felt like being thrown into the center of a tornado.

In Virtual-On, stray bullets would not harm one’s surroundings. But that did not change the fact that a massive object was moving around and the continuous flashes of light had to have a negative effect on the passenger planes being guided into the airport at night. The Raiden’s pilot knew that, but she showed no concern for her surroundings.

“The same color of Temjin as before… You didn’t learn your lesson, did you!?”

“I thought you’d say that. Listen, Misaka! I more or less know what you’re trying to do!!”

Since they exchanged words this time instead of keeping the conversation one-sided, Mikoto seemed to realize who she was fighting here.

But she did not let up on the attack.

No, her actions briefly twisted like a wedge had been driven into the gears, but she immediately began attacking with twice the intensity.

Only the referee in the sky accurately tracked their movements.

“You…why? You said you understand the situation, so why would you do this!? Are you saying you knew what you were doing!?”

“Yeah, I did. It was a rough method, but I had to stop you as soon as possible!!”

He held her blunt weapon back with his Blitz Saber, but instead of locking weapons, he slid the blade along the Zig-18 bazooka. He pointed the tip toward the head of Mikoto’s Raiden.

His primary weapon, Sleipnir, changed form. The close-range sword became the long-range rifle known as the Neutral Launcher.

He fired without hesitation.

He launched several glowing projectiles in a row, but Raiden swung her head to avoid them all. However, she lost her balance. Kamijou’s Temjin could not normally win when it came to power, but he locked weapons with her again. And he pushed forward.

“Touma-sama, the 90 seconds will end soon and the judgment will begin.”

“But if I keep this up…”

“Gh!!”

“5, 4, 3, 2, 1.”

Zero.

Temjin and Raiden came to a sudden stop. The spherical referee floating in the night sky swiftly calculated the result and declared the winner of the set.

“We have a 1 set lead, so let’s push on through, Touma-sama!”

She did not have to tell him twice.

But Kamijou was too impatient to wait around.

He sent a transmission to plead with Mikoto.

“Your method will only produce more victims!! Even if you gather everyone who has the same idea, more than half of them will end up as NPCs themselves. It’s too dangerous. And since you’ve Defected to protect the NPC player, you could cause a new player to Defect just like with the Blue Stalker! That’s like burning down the forest to plant a single tree!!”

“!! You don’t understand…”

“I was told to search for the Blue Stalker! I don’t know that meant, but if they are at the source of the Defections and the NPC players, then I can’t just leave them out there! Help me, Misaka. They have to know something we don-…!!”

“You don’t understand!”

She roared at him.

The second set began.

The risk was great, but he was close enough to end this with a close-range rush. As soon as the set began, Kamijou planned to push down the Raiden and swing down his Blitz Saber to settle things, but that was easily overturned.

It came from one of the Raiden’s heavy machinery fingertips.

He saw the thumb move as if it were flicking something.

(Oh, no…)

A nearly instinctual sense of danger filled him.

And Kamijou Touma had his Temjin move back with all its might.

It happened immediately afterwards.

“Touma-sama, something is coming. I can’t classify it!!”

(Oh, no!!)

The air was torn apart as a metal shell raced forward at frightening speed.

“The…Railgun!?”

Kamijou was dumbfounded.

Needless to say, Raiden had no such weapon. In that case, he could only think she had added it in with the Material Analyze feature, but…

A series of frictional noises reverberated without end.

Something like a black fog surrounded the light purple Raiden. It took shape using powerful magnetism and it looked like a sword or a wing.

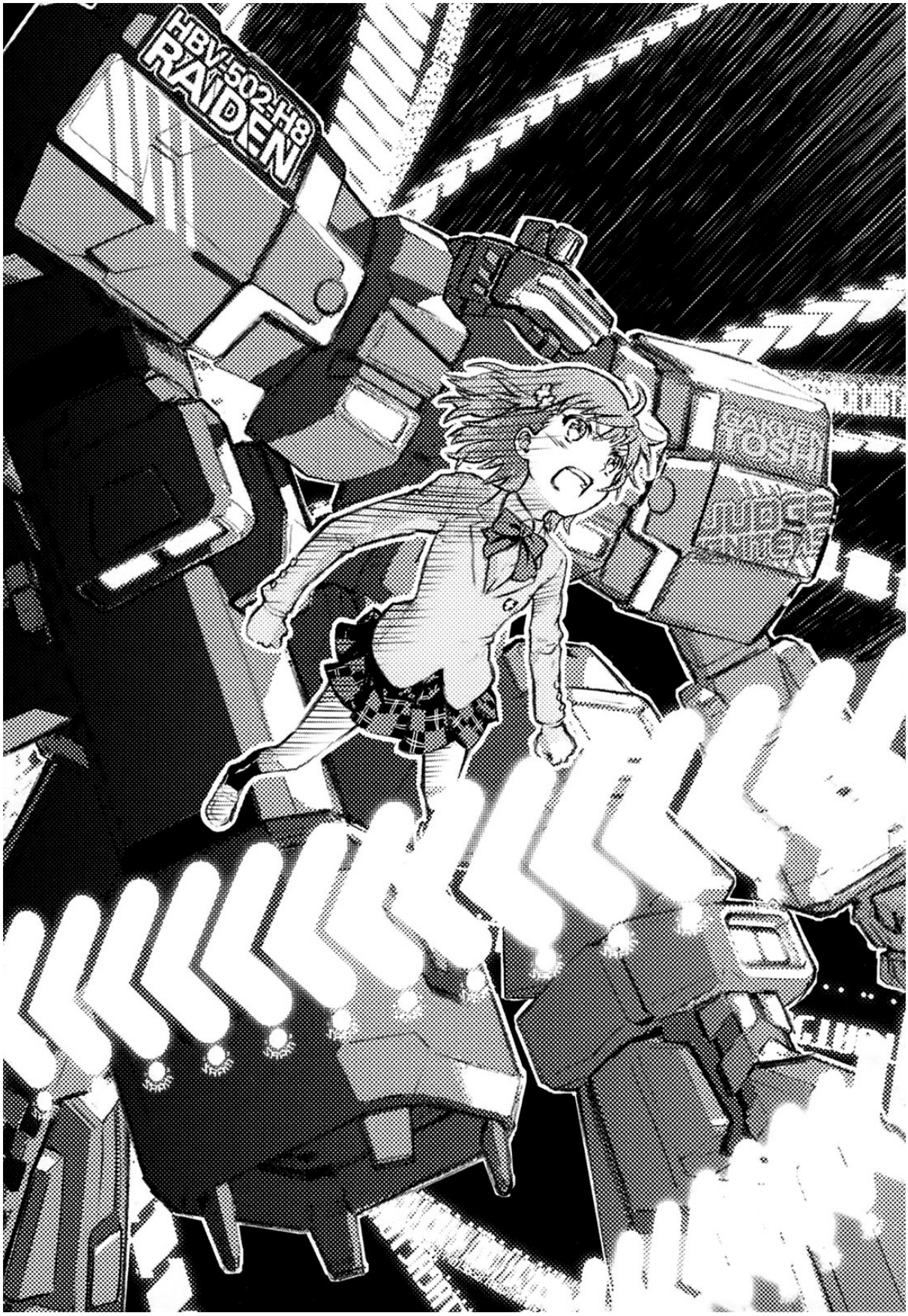
“What is that!?” exclaimed Lilina.

“An iron sand sword. Misaka…did she scan herself with the Material Analyze and incorporate it into her unit?”

Thinking back, Accelerator’s Specineff had shown signs of something similar when it had intervened in the Blue Stalker battle. It was true that giving a Virtuaroid the traits and features of one of Academy City’s seven Level 5s might give them a great advantage.

But…

(I can’t believe this… It’s more than just those kidnappers who used the Reverse Convert to gain a portion of their unit’s power. The dividing line between human and Virtuaroid is blurring here too!!)



“My friend disappeared…”

Misaka Mikoto spoke in a low voice.

It almost sounded like she was muttering a curse.

“She is wandering this city somewhere. And she’s coughing up blood as ignorant normal players beat her like a sandbag! And yet she’s sent right on to the next battle without even a chance to complain!! I’ve done everything I can, but I can’t search for her, I can’t find her, and I can’t stop this! Do you have any idea how that feels!?”

“…”

“So I have to save them. If I can’t find her in particular, I just have to save every last one of the people turned into NPCs!! Even if it’s unrealistic and the odds are astronomical, that’s the only shred of hope I have left!!”

She was essentially cheating at this point.

The already heavily-equipped Raiden used iron sand swords, lightning spears, and Railguns to attack from all directions. She filled in all the gaps in her attacks, so there was nothing he could do. Kamijou’s Temjin continued a desperate attempt to dodge, but no matter how much he fine-tuned and optimized the turbo repulsion, he doubted he could shake free of it all.

He rationally concluded he would lose this set.

It had to come down to the third and final set. He had to focus on observing his opponent’s idiosyncrasies and means of attack until then.

And even as he did that, he thought to himself.

It would be easy enough to say that he did understand. But there would be no weight behind it and it would not resonate inside Mikoto. For one thing, he did not even know who Mikoto had lost.

But that was no reason to fall silent and turn his back on her.

He decided to set aside the idealistic statements and to stop making everything sound nice and clean.

It might be irresponsible and illogical, but he did not care.

He wanted to be here.

He wanted to intervene.

He wanted to stop Mikoto here, before she strayed any further.

If he was going to hit her with anything, it had to be that true motivation.

“Lilina.”

“Yes?”

Within the intense exchange, Kamijou let out a slow breath.

“Sorry, but I need you to stick with me through a bit more of this.”

“Don’t be sorry. I never thought I could choose my player and I will perform any action you think up and input with your fingers. If continuing forward is what you really want to do, then go for it. This Temjin will always provide the movements you want, Touma-sama.”

He had steeled his resolve.

He faced forward once more.

“Understood, Misaka… We must be on different paths.”

“…”

“And it’s easy for me to crush your path. You want to even out, average out, and share the debt. To do that, you have to build up a massive amount of points. …In other words, if I defeat you, lure you into rough plays, and stain your score, you can’t use your plan.”

“You…!!!???”

Temjin and Raiden stopped moving again.

The referee calculated out their points.

“! Just as I thought, it’s 1-1. This next set will determine everything!!”

Kamijou ignored Lilina’s warning.

He ignored her and spoke.

“So bring it, Misaka.”

With her Railgun, iron sand swords, and lightning spears, she had added a frightening variety of options into Virtual-On. The Raiden with that fearsome lineup stood before him.

And Kamijou gestured back toward himself with Temjin’s fingers to lightly provoke her.

“If you want to continue down your path, you need to crush my path first.”

Part 28

Constant explosions shook the night.

Kamijou’s Temjin and Mikoto’s Raiden clashed again and again on the runway.

This was the final set.

Whether via destruction or points, this final battle would settle everything.

The location had few obstacles and little cover. Since Raiden's selling point was its firepower, failing to dodge its attacks might mean instant destruction. The standard method would be to take advantage of her slow speed to fire from a distance, focus on the amount left in the different weapon gauges while wearing her down to stop her, and take points that way. But Mikoto's swift movements defied the normal assumptions for Raiden's speed, so he could not rely on that.

The V-Discs on their backs were heated to a bright scarlet and drew trails behind their incredible movements like tail lights.

He sometimes engaged in a close-range rush similar to mixed martial arts and sometimes moved away and sniped from a distance. Just when he thought he had dodged a shot from Raiden's Zig-18 bazooka, a lightning spear pierced the explosive and detonated it near Temjin. But in exchange for the damage, Temjin used the smokescreen and caught Mikoto off guard by rapidly approaching and slamming his Blitz Saber toward her right leg.

Their scores changed with dizzying speed and their weapon gauges continually filled and depleted.

Their primary focus was not losing the set via destruction. After that, they fought to score a down on the other.

They fought over the points.

They were also checking the total number of rough plays listed on their command logs.

Since they had Defected, this was more than just a sport for them, so that was literally a countdown to their deaths.

"Uhee!? Wh-wh-wh-what-wha-what is that!?"

"Lilina!! If the data can't keep up, then cut it off! I'll aim by eye!!"

"Oh, honestly, honestly, honestly!! That customized Raiden's entire body is crackling, its surface is covered in ECMs, and who knows when it'll make a cyber attack that can slip right through our defenses!? I know I can handle anything in binary, but it's still frightening!"

"I see. So her hacking power is the most troublesome part. I hope that Raiden can't use it…"

"If you get that, then hurry up and silence her!!"

On the other hand, that might mean that even her hacking was not enough to return the NPC players to normal. Furashina Ririn seemed to specialize in that, but even she had said there was only so much she could do.

Tsuchimikado had said Kanzaki Kaori of the magic side was taking action, so Kamijou felt as

if formless concepts like people's hearts or lives were showing up here.

"Are you not going to use that power you're so proud of?" asked Mikoto.

"Unfortunately, I've been a Level 0 from the beginning."

"Take me too lightly and you're headed straight for destruction. You know it really pisses me off when I see things 'like this'."

Maybe so, thought Kamijou.

He still did not know why someone (probably the Blue Stalker) was increasing the number of Defected players and the NPC players that came from them. But it was true that it felt a lot like someone was toying with lives just like that experiment in which the #1 used and disposed of 20,000 mass-produced military clones.

That had stimulated Mikoto.

And it had been exacerbated by affecting someone close to her.

"But have you forgotten?" replied Kamijou as he cut off that line of thinking. "I'm not the kind of person to take even a single step back when faced with things 'like that'."

"!! Then what are you even trying to do!?"

Four iron sand swords surrounded Raiden and attacked him like whips. And after they cut off his escape, she launched a Railgun from straight ahead.

Kamijou used all of his invisible repulsion to make a high-speed dash.

Fleeing to the side or backwards would have been meaningless, so he moved straight ahead. If he avoided the greatest threat by a hair's breadth, he would find Raiden defenseless thanks to the slight stiffening from the recoil of launching the attack.

With an explosive noise, Kamijou ignored all of the warnings from Lilina and moved forward.

He had heard the Virtuaroids were materialized data, but Temjin was far heavier and sturdier than a human. That worked to his advantage. He was up against the Railgun itself and the deadly shockwave and wind stirred up around it. A flesh-and-blood human would likely have been killed by those side effects alone. Kamijou's Temjin was partially torn away in the process, but he successfully dodged the metal shell, even if just barely. And then he attacked Raiden.

"Gh…!?"

"Misaka!!"

He wielded the Blitz Saber close-range sword.

He focused his mind.

First, lights crossed paths. Then Temjin powerfully turned 180 degrees while Mikoto's Raiden launched multiple iron sand swords directly behind her without turning around. That was the second exchange. More and more and more and more exchanges followed.

But had she noticed?

Kamijou was swinging his entire body around to slash his close-range sword while Mikoto was standing in place and relying entirely on her iron sand swords. This produced a difference in speed and instantaneous power between Temjin and Raiden. That difference grew with each attack and it eventually grew too wide to ignore.

In other words, she was ultimately unable to keep up with his attacks.

"Why?"

She forcibly turned herself around using the weight of her Zig-18 bazooka and by kicking off of a wall created by pulling in metal panels and beams with magnetism. Her top speed was greater than the customized Temjin, but the Temjin had greater mobility and stability.

"Why won't you let me do this!? I have a way of ridding her of her pain! I have the power to pull her from the Virtuaroid where she's forced to continue fighting even as she's left battered and bloody! That's all…that's all I wanted to do!!"

"This isn't about who's right, Misaka!!"

Temjin's Blitz Saber gave a roar.

"It's about which option I want to choose! And I'm saying I can't bear to watch as your desire to save someone ultimately puts more lives in danger! No!! Those strict words aren't what I want to get across to you!!"

Her iron sand swords could no longer make it in time.

He dodged the attacks from straight ahead and kept a position out of reach of the powerful Binary Lotus laser weapons and her Railgun, so Temjin could not be crushed where he was.

So…

"I'm saying I don't want to see you become a villain, Misaka!! And I'm willing to become a villain myself to prevent it!!!!!"

There was no reason for Kamijou's Temjin to lose now.

A bluish-white light followed the path of his close-range sword and it drew a complex line that swiftly silenced the Raiden reinforced with so much firepower.

Part 29

Even if they had Defected, it was still based on the Next Generation Game of Virtual-On.

Attacks were used to earn points, not to destroy your opponent. The winner and loser were determined by the points.

And no matter how much a player wanted to keep going, their unit would not move once the match was over.

Raiden fell silent.

Kamijou's Temjin was similarly locked as they waited for the results.

"I know Defections are common during battles with a player going by the username of Blue Stalker. They must be good at pushing people in that direction. But they aren't the only condition, so crushing the source might not be enough to solve this."

"So you decided to try a method other than crushing the source?"

"The Blue Stalker appears so unpredictably that there was no real way to attack them anyway."

That meant not even Mikoto know where the Blue Stalker was or how to contact them.

"I know my method is wrong, but the fact remains that there is no better method. Assuming the Blue Stalker knows something and that there's some way of stopping this all in one fell swoop seems like wishful thinking to me. They might just be enjoying the chaos."

"…I know that."

"So with that in mind, I have to ask: what are you going to do? How exactly are you going to attack the Blue Stalker?"

"The same thing I did with you."

"?"

"I don't know where the Blue Stalker is, so I'll have them come to me. I just have to do whatever it is they least want me to do."

"…That being?"

"I don't know how they benefit, but they've been using Virtual-On to increase the number of Defected players and the number of NPC players from there. I don't know which is their goal and which is a side effect, but stopping it is simple enough. …I just have to attack the legal Virtual-On in a very public way. If no one can play Virtual-On, the Defections from there will stop too. The Blue Stalker won't be able to make their very first step."

"Are you serious…? You mean you're going to stop the entire Virtual-On system!? I can't even imagine the economic losses if you cause a data blackout across all 23 districts! This goes beyond rating restaurants and getting the latest information; the people who are really

into it can't read or write kanji or even do simple arithmetic without the machine!!"

"Luckily, the portable devices used for Virtual-On are so reliant on the centers that they need to be taken there for a simple firmware update. Take out the centers and they can't maintain the service. …But I don't know if I'll really do it. I hope I can lure out the Blue Stalker by only making it look like I will."

A short silence followed.

Mikoto may have been shocked into silence.

But she finally spoke.

"Fine then… I'm a part of this too, so I guess I can help you lure out the Blue Stalker."

"Misaka…?"

"You're talking about taking out the centers, but you don't really have a way of doing that, do you? Surely you aren't thinking of pouring gasoline around to set them on fire. So if you're going to mess with the data, you'll want me around."

"Wait. I…"

"Stop. You yourself said you were fighting because you didn't want me to become a villain. Well, I'm the same. I'm not going to let you become a villain on your own. And this is for that girl too."

Kamijou brought a hand to his forehead.

He had not expected things to develop in this direction.

He was a little afraid to let things continue like this, so he changed the subject.

"Come to think of it, who is this girl you're talking about? Oh, or should I not have asked?"

"It's fine."

Mikoto replied with the voice of someone once more facing the problem they had to solve.

That girl was someone who attended Tokiwadai Middle School and was always by Mikoto's side.

Or so Kamijou assumed. But what she said next betrayed those expectations.

"I'm talking about a girl named Furashina Ririn."

Part 30

“Ahhh! Where have you been all this time, Shirai-san!?”

“Uiharu, I’ve been regularly reporting back while searching for Onee-sama, haven’t I?”

“Uheh. So Misaka-san has vanished so thoroughly not even a Teleporter like you can find her? But we’ve had a rough time of it, too! We managed to get through today, but I don’t know what we’re going to do tomorrow! We need to do our best as we approach the finals!!”

The 3 girls discussed the issue as they entered through the glass door of a fairly pricey convenience store that used only natural ingredients.

Close by, another girl leaned against the wall next to the entrance.

“Yeah…”

With her honey-blonde hair fluttering behind her, Shokuhou Misaki faced the small screen of her portable device with annoyance in her voice. She was equipped with home-theater-level airtight audiovisual goggles built with special-ordered wood cone speakers to make them more “classy”, but she was in no mood to play and only felt like losing herself in the internet.

She munched on vegetable chips as she groaned to herself.

“Whyyy is everyone spreading this story about trying to save a nonexistent girl? Then again, I can control people’s minds, so maybe I shouldn’t be lamenting the mysteries of the human mind.”

There was supposedly a girl named Furashina Ririn.

She supposedly loved Virtual-On more than anything.

She had supposedly Defected, become an NPC player, and found herself fighting battles against her will.

The word “supposedly” was always present.

Giving it any thought would reveal how unnatural the information was, but people on the internet were weak to multiple sources. By placing the same information on multiple blogs and message boards, its plausibility could be increased erroneously.

Since everyone was saying the same thing, people assumed it had to be correct and that it was universally known.

“Queen.”

A girl with long ringlet curls quietly called for her from nearby.

Shokuhou moved her large, round eyes.

“Have you figured out what is going on?”

“Yes. But I can only call it mysterious even with an explanation.”

“That’s right. This feels like it involves laws and technological abilities beyond the Academy City standards.”

There was a reason they tilted their heads.

Players would enter a state similar to sensory deprivation, their personality would approach collapse, they would have difficulty walking and breathing, and they would become NPCs. It was unclear if the rumors of players vanishing into thin air were true or not, but some had gone missing and their fate seemed to be linked to that of their unit. The proposed method of saving them was to even out, average out, and share their sullied score by forming a team with them. A single rough play was diluted within 100 fair plays.

That was a process to return the zombies to the world of the living.

That method was used to bring back those who had been lost, but what would happen if it was used on a girl who had never existed in the first place and only appeared in rumors?

Furashina Ririn.

Had something by that name truly been born in this city?

“Ahh, ahh.”

Shokuhou left the bag of vegetable chips with her ringlet curled servant, rubbed her index finger against her temple, and breathed a deep sigh.

“I was trying to defeat Misaka-san yesterday to ‘wake her up’ before she got in too deep and decided to Defect, but she just has to get so stubborn when it comes to things like this.”

Part 31

Kamijou had no idea what she meant.

Her words made not even one iota of sense to him.

“Wait,” he said in his Temjin’s cockpit. “Furashina…Ririn? Is that what you just said?”

“Yes. What about it?”

“But that makes no sense. I mean, Furashina is in my room right now! She can’t be trapped inside a Virtuaroid as an NPC!!”

“What…?”

“We need to go back over all of our information! Something isn’t right! But this contradiction is

sure to be an important key to all this. So, Misaka, please tell me everything you know!!"

"There isn't much to tell." Mikoto seemed confused and her explanation came in bits and pieces. "There's a girl named Furashina Ririn. She taught us about the Next Generation Game of Virtual-On, she gave us a lot of ideas about how to fight, and it's thanks to her that we managed to defeat Shokuhou and continue onto the main tournament."

Something seemed off.

So he asked about it.

"She gave you ideas? So this Furashina didn't actually fight alongside you?"

"But she was part of our team!! She was the 5th member!"

"But you've never actually met her, have you? You were speaking with someone going by the name Furashina Ririn, but you have no proof it wasn't someone else entirely!"

"Eh? Wait a second. Where are you going with this!? I promise you I-…!!"

Her words were suddenly cut off.

There was a simple reason.

The sound of an empty can being crushed was amplified several hundred times as it pierced through the Raiden's chest.

"…Ah?"

Kamijou Touma's thoughts ground to a halt.

Whether Defected or not, this was all based on Virtual-On, so no amount of hitting each other could put their lives in danger.

But the glowing projectile that tore through Mikoto's Virtuaroid rejected that assumption.

The beam of light punched through the Raiden's chest and out the back.

The rectangular backpack of the V-Converter was torn through, the motor deck bent out from within and was blown away, and the V-Disc contained inside was shattered.

The red hot shards flew through the air.

Like the fading flames of life, they fell to the ground and lost their light.

"…Bah…ksshh, ahh, ksssshhhhhhh…"

"Wait, Misaka."

"Kssssshhhh!! Kssshhh!! Kssssssshhhhhhhh!!"

"Misaka!!"

“Click!! ——————”

Only a plain electronic tone sounded.

He had no idea what that meant.

But it sounded to him like the flatlining signal of an EKG.

“Ahh.”

And.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

“Furashina: My plan was to spread rumors to create an outline for the nonexistent Furashina Ririn, but since there had to be some basis behind them, I had to prepare a few things first. I registered an empty apartment with a fake name, placed a nonexistent student’s data in a school server, and left trash or a handkerchief at a meeting place to make it look like she just missed someone after setting up a meeting. I did similar things with online activity. Simply sending messages doesn’t provide much realism, so I placed hints here and there which could be combined into what seemed like a real presence. But the rumors have grown so much now that I can just sit back and watch as more and more people claim to know Furashina Ririn or that she’s a friend of a friend. Now do you understand what happened?”

“…!!”

Kamijou clenched his teeth.

He doubted this was really Furashina Ririn. It was clearly someone pretending to be her. He was being toyed with by the Blue Stalker who had tricked Misaka Mikoto into trying to save a friend from the Defection trouble.

The chat window closed and the man spoke directly once more.

“Once the results hit a certain level, I just have to wait for the final result to appear on its own. You can take your time and praise your freedom until that final moment. Although the end result will be the same no matter what you choose.”

Far in the distance, he saw a Cypher with distinctive blue coloring and yellow lines. It was lit by multiple guide lights and yet still blended into the darkness.

The Blue Stalker wielded a brutal close-range sword longer than it was tall.

But Temjin did not move a finger.

His opponent slowly turned around and transformed its humanoid form into something more like a fighter jet.

Kamijou let out a roar when he realized the Blue Stalker was preparing to leave.

“Wait!!”

“If you have regrets and still wish to struggle, then come with me.”

A repulsive pressure blew back at Kamijou as an answer.

The one who knew everything had once more stole something from Kamijou and then left before his eyes.

It was over.

Silence surrounded him.

The maddening heat in his head cooled.

He finally grasped the current situation.

Kamijou Touma screamed.

He screamed on and on as if to crush the pressure of what he had lost.

Between the Lines 2

It seems Code Phoenix will pass Stage 2.

The Plajiner bud is demonstrating behavior very different from that of the original girl loved by the Tangram, but this too must be one option among the infinitely-branching “paths”.

The human NPCs were another unexpected change, but I can accept those as another possibility for the Shadows.

At the moment, I have no chance of completing Stage 3.

I must first acquire Plajiner, the world’s greatest black box. From there, I can use that power to find a solution to Stage 3.

I am aware how pathetic this is. I keep talking about escaping the bonds of Plajiner, yet I still find myself deifying Plajiner in a way. Does this make me the same as a zoologist criticizing a witch for using a familiar?

My birthplace had passed the point of no return. Everything was quantified and calculable, so it was a world in which the field of possibilities had been closed off. The few enlarged plants held all the wealth for themselves and they created a cold cage in which overthrowing those in power was utterly impossible.

Within that, there was one symbolic existence. The V-Crystals, Cyber Imaginary Space, Virtuaroids, the original Fei-Yen, and the Tangram. Beyond all that advanced technology stood the name of a single researcher. In other words, that name was synonymous with technology and anyone chosen by that name was blessed with technology. That deified and sacred researcher became the winner.

L’Ln Plajiner.

The scales of the world took the form of that girl and I will smash them to smithereens. I will bring possibility back to the world. And to do that, I have come to another “path” using the Tangram’s rejection.

I will do this even if it means relying on the other Plajiner, Furashina Ririn.

Now, let the final game begin.

Chapter 3

Part 1

“Ehh? What does that mean???”

Kamijou was not the only one thrown into chaos.

Night had fallen and all of the day’s tournament matches were over, so it was time to head home. At the same time, a group was holding a meeting about the following day’s finals.

Aogami Pierce and the other employees were in complete disarray on the center’s main floor.

The man who seemed to be in charge gave a troubled look.

“Like I said, a reinvestigation of the Virtuaroids’ actions shows that quite a few units are making actions theoretically impossible even with the publicly available Material Analyze. Simply put, they are using Defected PDs. …We hadn’t noticed until now, so I can only assume they have been using body doubles, sealed cradles, or other tricks to hide it. There also seems to be a strange rumor that Defected players disappear during the Ring Scan.”

That was of course cheating.

Once it was discovered, they could punish them. And that meant disqualifying them.

However…

“I said there were quite a few, right?”

“Don’t tell me…”

“23 teams participated in the main tournament, but we discovered something in over half of them. Someone on those teams is using a Defected device. And it makes sense. The Defected units are bound to be stronger than the legal Virtuaroids, so of course a lot of them will show up in the tournament.”

“But if we punish all of them…”

“Yes, the tournament will fall apart. Even if a few teams remain, what good is sending them to the finals? People just won’t care.”

But they could not continue as is either because it would look like a farce.

It may not have been his place as a part-timer, but Aogami Pierce opened his mouth without thinking. That was just how much he loved Virtual-On.

“Whatever we do, don’t we have to contact them first? We need to settle this with them somehow.”

“About that.”

Another dark look came over the man in charge.

There’s more? gloomily wondered Aogami Pierce.

“We can’t reach them.”

“Huh?”

“We can’t contact them. I’ve tried a few times already, but they aren’t responding. I thought they might be avoiding our calls or ran off because they think we’re onto them. But I still got worried, so I tried contacting the few safe teams left. And here’s the thing, I couldn’t reach them either. Since they haven’t Defected, they wouldn’t need to avoid the call or run off.”

“You mean…wait, what does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” The man shrugged. “All I know is that the tournament participants are disappearing. It’s almost like they’re being hunted down by a ghost or something.”

This was no longer just about the tournament.

Without the contestants, the entire event was dead in the water.

There was sure to be a major panic tomorrow. Even as a part-timer, Aogami Pierce was sure to have a crowd demanding an explanation. It might even develop into a heated argument.

But something was pressing in on them that overshadowed that normal sort of problem.

Aogami Pierce gulped as he thought about whatever was lurking within the failed tournament.

(What is going on in this city?)

Part 2

“…”

The “match” was finally over.

Temjin disappeared and Kamijou Touma was left all alone in the airport.

The girl who had supposedly been there before was gone.

There was only silence.

And an unbearable chill.

The spiky-haired boy could no longer stand on his own two feet. He lost his balance and staggered 2 or 3 steps to the left. He bumped into the side of a fuel tanker truck. He then slid down to the ground like drool pulled down by gravity.

Where had he gone wrong?

What could he have chosen to avoid this future?

He thought and thought but found no answer. It was so unreasonable and had happened so suddenly that he could not perform any self-analysis.

He had an enemy to defeat: the Blue Stalker.

But even that thought did not light a fire in his chest. He could tell something dark and soot-like was caked over his heart, but that did not give him the power needed to cheer himself up.

The sense of loss was so great that he did not even shift into proper anger.

He could not.

Kamijou Touma had nearly forgotten how to form emotions.

“…This is just painful to watch.”

He heard a voice.

For a while, he did not even look in that direction. The speaker did not move either. They were waiting for him to move. Finally, Kamijou ever-so-slowly turned his head as stiffly as a doll to view the source of the voice.

He saw a white-haired, red-eyed monster.

This was Academy City’s #1, the peak of the seven Level 5s.

That shadow named Accelerator supported his weight on a modern-style cane and waved some papers that looked like some kind of report.

“I just have one question: do you have it in you to keep going?”

“…”

Kamijou sluggishly but desperately tried to understand those words. All while thinking no amount of sleep deprivation would slow his mind this much.

“Why should I keep going?” he muttered after finally giving up on processing it all. “I can fight and fight and fight…but what does that get me? I might trip along the way, or even at the very beginning, and then lose something I can’t afford to lose…”

“Don’t ask me,” cruelly spat out the monster. “Only someone who’s actually reached the end can tell you that. At the very least, someone who gave up during the ascent can’t talk about the scenery from the mountain peak.”

The next thing Kamijou knew, Accelerator held a large scythe in the hand not holding his modern-style cane. It seemed to have appeared from thin air and it was Ifleesa, Specineff’s weapon.

This was the same as the Apharmd and Grys-Vok that had attacked Furashina Ririn.

In that case, what did Specineff specialize in?

“If you want, I can contaminate your mind and erase your memories. How about it? Do you want to live out your life oblivious to the gaping wound in your back thanks to some strange anesthetic?”

“_____”

He felt a slight pain deep in his head.

That pain insisted that it would never be healed no matter what he did, continue on or give up. So the only question was what kind of pain he could bear.

Would he continue on and be wounded?

Or would he smile and be wounded?

Which would you prefer, Kamijou Touma?

“…That’s…right.”

He felt like some gears had finally locked together in his chest.

He silently moved away from the filthy wall he was leaning against. He once more fought gravity. Strength filled his legs and he gradually stood up.

“I can sit around worrying after I’ve seen this through to the end. There has to be more I can do.”

Accelerator did not offer him his hand.

The #1 simply waited until the end.

“You weren’t supposed to need this.” He shoved the report into Kamijou’s chest. “But you do

now that you've taken this step. Don't forget your position here."

"What is this…?"

"An internal investigation report on that insane bastard known as the Blue Stalker. Although I'm not sure how much of it can be trusted given how out there a lot of it is."

"…"

Kamijou had few good memories when it came to secret reports. Most of them felt like a bog that dragged you down into depthless darkness. And that was bound to be even truer when it was given to him by the peak of Academy City who existed in the underside of the city.

"How did you get this?"

"I simply got involved in a different way but ended up in the same place as you."

"…?"

Kamijou briefly thought about the dark world Accelerator lived in, but…

"If it had to do with that, I would've just ignored it."

Kamijou heard several dry clattering sounds as Accelerator carelessly threw multiple electronic devices to the ground.

They were portable devices.

Their LCD screens were broken, their interior chips were exposed, and they were clearly all dead.

"You…"

"I've already smashed up all of that kind of thing. There were a lot of dangerous people hanging around the administrator of that underground site who saw himself as a kind of prophet and around the old man who had given up on life thanks to his own unnecessary efforts."

He implicitly revealed that there had been a completely separate path to this incident and that Kamijou Touma simply had not seen it. He had overcome as much hardship as Kamijou to come this far.

"It seems Virtual-On was spread to benefit the Blue Stalker in some way. I investigated the guy spreading the information, the guy paying for it all as a sponsor, and more, but it looks like I ultimately didn't make it in time."

Then what else had happened?

Did this monster live in a world beyond what was seen in the light of day?

Was there something that could link them together?

Kamijou gave him a look of pure doubt, but it did not seem the #1 intended to give all the answers.

Accelerator looked away in annoyance and clicked his tongue before speaking.

“To put it another way, that’s what make this such a pain in the ass. Now that the original’s been turned into an NPC, the only way to grant that brat’s wish is to switch my focus over to helping the losers recover.”

The #1 did not try to say anything more.

He too must have had something he had to prioritize above all else.

And it was something he could achieve by working with Kamijou.

“…”

Even so, Kamijou grabbed the report, looked down, and scanned through all of the text found there.

And he did it of his own free will.

Part 3

Investigation Report on Target: Blue Stalker.

Name: Unknown. Estimated Sex: Male. Estimated Age: 25. Estimated Blood Type: A. Nationality/Origin: Unknown. Education/Job History: Unknown.

All of the estimated entries are based on witness information and acquired samples, but we were unable to identify a clear individual from the genetic information. It was less like something was interfering with our analysis and more like there was some ambiguity in the genetic information itself. We are continuing the analysis, but I unfortunately must report that it will be difficult to ensure any results.

My honest impression is that there are no records whatsoever of the target individual. This is true of electronic information as well as analog media such as paper and microfilm. It is hard to imagine any normal means of concealing one’s information so thoroughly.

He may not be hiding the information. As we feared, the information may never have existed in the first place.

There are a few theories concerning how to create something from nothing, but this appears to be different from a phenomenon like Kazakiri Hyouka. (As a side note, that example

seems to apply better to Furashina Ririn. For details, refer to the report on her.)

The Blue Stalker uses technology from a system entirely different from ours and has widely permeated Academy City's center stage via Virtual-On. (We made a few different attempts to artificially end that trend, but they all ended in failure. For details, refer to the report on that issue.) We doubt all of this popped up overnight by coincidence, so the Blue Stalker must have been involved in some way.

One of the theories proposed by the Board of Directors is a parallel world, but this cannot be explained using our leading theory in which history acts like a rubber string.

The rubber string theory states that there is only one world and various parallel worlds are newly created when an alternate turn is taken at a branch. We picture it like placing pegs on a pinball or pachinko machine and passing the rubber string across the board so that it forms a single path even as the pegs bend it every which way, so it is much more like saying there is only one history and that it can be freely manipulated.

On the other hand, explaining the Blue Stalker requires a theory in which there are multiple worlds that exist literally parallel to each other.

The rubber string theory exists along a single line of history, but if we view that history as a flat rubber string, perhaps there is actually a bundle of countless strings. Or perhaps there is a reverse side to it like a storage tape.

That is enough discussion of theories and philosophy for now, but the point is that the Blue Stalker surpasses all of that.

He comes from a world where what we call Virtual-On is perfectly normal.

It is unknown what the Blue Stalker is attempting to do by crossing to another world, but its effects will be too great.

There is a fear this will conflict with the Academy City style of esper development that alters phenomena within a limited area using a broad interpretation of quantum theory. This could easily threaten the very existence of Academy City itself.

We are considering sending in the Kiharas.

Furashina Ririn similarly requires immediate action.

Part 4

“What is this…?”

Kamijou flipped through the report again and again as he read and reread the text and tried to consider what it said. He was fairly certain he had not understood even half of it.

Accelerator shrugged.

“It says our enemy is from another world. Sounds like a bad joke to me.”

“No, not that.”

“Ah?”

“Why is Furashina said to be as dangerous as the Blue Stalker?”

There is no family register data on the girl named Furashina Ririn. Pursuing the online data suggests she first appeared as posts on a few message boards and blogs.

At first, he did not understand what it meant.

But as he continued reading, an unpleasant sweat covered his face.

Afterwards, a girl going by the name Furashina Ririn was actually seen in a few places.

His hands shook.

He felt a powerful discrepancy between what he had seen with his own eyes and the cold text of this report.

We predict her existence came from the nonexistent girl created as a means to save the NPC players and a technique to ‘pull back up’ those who had sunk.

The conclusion felt like a finishing blow.

Kamijou suppressed his dizziness and read that final text.

There are traces of the Blue Stalkers’ involvement even in the initial stage of spreading the rumors, so it can be assumed that Furashina Ririn’s very existence has been greatly influenced by his goals. Caution is needed.

“…I can’t believe this.”

He recalled when Furashina Ririn was nearly abducted in the twilit streets.

Had that been connected to the Blue Stalker too?

The Blue Stalker had some kind of malicious plan, but what if he had always needed to let Furashina Ririn walk free for a while and then capture her?

If Furashina Ririn was his goal, would he sit idly by now? And if not, what would he attack to get his hands on her?

“Goddammit… Index!!”

Part 5

The metal front door was broken from its hinges.

The balcony glass was shattered and a chilly night wind blew through the living area.

There was no sign of life in the dark room.

There was no one there.

Not Index and not Furashina Ririn.

There was no point in asking who had done this. He did not even consider the possibility that the Blue Stalker had not been involved and that Furashina Ririn had harmed Index. In this case, the most likely suspect was the culprit. No other possibility came to mind.

“…”

Kamijou Touma slowly took a breath in the trashed student dorm.

His senses had numbed over.

Furashina Ririn had likely been abducted by the Blue Stalker.

But what about Index?

She had only just met Furashina and had not had much of an opportunity to speak with her, so they would not have been that close. But if Furashina was being taken away before her eyes, would Index have just watched?

And if she had not, what would have happened?

What would the Blue Stalker have done when Index resisted?

This enemy was not a magician, so he would not be fixated on the 103,000 grimoires in her mind. If he had no intention of abducting her and getting information out of her, how would the Blue Stalker have disposed of that nuisance?

The image of that Raiden with a hole through its chest came to mind.

As did the face of Misaka Mikoto who had been lost along with the unit.

Had that happened here too?

Had the Blue Stalker shown no mercy?

“……
……”

For an instant.

Just an instant.

Kamijou felt something colder than the night wind blowing out from his chest.

That was when he heard a quiet mew.

“Sphinx?”

The calico cat stuck its head out from under the broken bed. It alone must have escaped danger. Spotting Kamijou, it trotted over.

This may have been meaningless.

The cat surviving would not bring Index or Furashina Ririn back.

But.

Even so.

That one remaining connection to what he had thought was normal helped Kamijou relax his muscles somewhat.

He felt the truly hopeless blackness inside his chest recede somewhat.

He crouched down, picked up the kitten, and spoke.

“Sorry, Sphinx. It’ll take a while longer to clean up the room. Can you give me just a little bit of time?”

The cat could not understand human language, so he was only making sure his own limiter was in place.

He set the cat back down and left the door-less room.

After leaving the dorm, he found Accelerator waiting while resting on his modern-style cane.

“What’re you going to do?”

“I have even more reason to kick the Blue Stalker’s ass now, so that’s exactly what I’ll do.”

“How exactly?”

“I’ll use everything available to me. …Even if that means help from you.”

“You’re asking me to lend you firepower?”

“No.”

Accelerator frowned a bit when Kamijou immediately cut him off.

Then the spiky-haired boy said it.

“I want you to stop me if I seriously try to kill the Blue Stalker. That’s the help I want.”

He spoke quietly.

But that did not mean there was no emotion behind his voice.

Accelerator had met a variety of monsters and come in contact with many forms of malice.

But he could not ignore the darkness he saw in those eyes.

(…Fine, then.)

“I don’t really care, but where are you going to start? Surely you aren’t going to head back out without knowing where you’re going.”

If Kamijou had no answer, Accelerator intended to punch him out and deal with this on his own, but Kamijou Touma had a surprising answer.

“I have one clue. We just have to hope Anti-Skill hasn’t acted yet.”

Part 6

It was late at night in the hospital where the crashed van’s driver had been transported for emergency care.

But he had no life-threatening injuries and only had some light whiplash in his neck. Anti-Skill had insisted he be hospitalized regardless. In other words, something seemed fishy about the crash, so they had him hospitalized as an excuse to keep him from fleeing.

Being hospitalized for such light injuries was odd and it was incredibly unusual to be given a private room right away, but few people were going to ignore the doctors and head home.

And that man currently had two visitors even though it was well past visiting hours.

They were Kamijou Touma and Accelerator.

The man in the bed wheezed like a whistle when he received these rude late-night visitors.

“Ee, ee.”

“I would say it’s a pleasure to meet you, but I can see from your reaction that you know we’re already ‘acquainted’.”

“E-eek! Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!?”

He frantically reached for the nurse call button and rapidly tapped it with his thumb.

But there was no response.

Something had stabbed into the top end of the bed.

It was the grim reaper’s scythe.

Accelerator had summoned Ifleesa from thin air and cut the nurse call cord along with the mattress and springs.

“We could always ask you our questions after I destroy your head with ‘this’,” said the white monster.

“A-abhah!? Abrbah! Please wait! I’m in the hospital!!”

“Now, now, now.”

Kamijou maintained a smile as he dragged over a folding chair for visitors and walked over to the bed. All while holding a blunt weapon that could probably smash a human skull if he swung it down.

“One of them was Grys-Vok. The other was Apharmd. So what about you? Temjin? Fei-Yen? Oh, that’s right! You can’t use electronics in the hospital, can you? Then I guess you don’t have that Defected portable device that makes you so special. You can’t pull out your prized Virtuaroid weapon.”

He was defenseless.

Now that he was reminded of that, the man trembled and asked a question.

“Wh-wh-why are you here!?”

“Oh, no reason! I’m not going to do anything. Even if your good friend the Blue Stalker ‘killed’ two girls I know, I’m not going to do anything to you. He’s an exception. I saw him entirely ignore the rough play check and the NPC player issue to fire straight through the V-Converter on a Virtuaroid’s back and eliminate the player in a single shot. But I won’t do anything even if that happens to you. Oh, but will you turn into an NPC if it happens when you aren’t in a Virtuaroid? Or will you just be burnt to cinders? What do you think will happen?”

“……
……”

The man’s mouth flapped wordlessly and he looked up at Accelerator, in search of help.

He felt such great pressure that the monster wielding a more obvious weapon seemed like the safer option.

Still smiling, Kamijou slowly sat down in the chair.

“And with that in mind, we’d like to ask you some questions. How much do you know about the Blue Stalker? You were abducting Furashina for him, weren’t you? You can’t be complete strangers.”

“I-I can’t tell you that. You know he’ll kill me!!”

“Let me ask you something else.” Kamijou spoke each word carefully. “Do you still not know how we found you here?”

“Eh? Um…well…”

“How many hospitals do you think there are in Academy City? Hell, let’s just narrow it down to District 7 alone. There would normally be no way to know which hospital an ambulance will visit after an accident. Unless, that is, some internal information leaks out. And if we could do it, what makes you think the Blue Stalker can’t?”

“Y-you don’t mean…?”

“I said one of them was Grys-Vok and the other was Apharmd, didn’t I? Do you not know what happened to them?”

How could he know?

He had been confined to this room ever since taken to the hospital and the TV news had only mentioned that there was a traffic accident.

But if these two had located this hospital right away…

“Anyone will do what it takes to stay alive,” said Kamijou. “If they sold your information to us, they might sell it to someone else too. I mean, you 3 failed your job and let Furashina Ririn escape. The Blue Stalker is pissed. He can’t have his information getting to Anti-Skill. The Grys-Vok and Apharmd managed to go into hiding, so they might have a chance to recover. But you? Not so much. And I’m sure those 2 want a gift to get back on his good side.”

“That’s not true… That can’t be true!! Marika and Takato have worked with me for ages! We were a great team! Th-they wouldn’t just sell me out like that!”

“If you say so. Well, we’ll be going.”

“Ah? Eh?”

Kamijou ignored the confused man and turned back toward Accelerator.

He stood up from the folding chair and spoke.

“He can apparently handle this on his own. I’m worried about the Grys-Vok and Apharmd

too, but if he can manage on his own, we can try elsewhere."

"…Are you sure? He's almost certainly going to die."

"He's convinced otherwise, so there's nothing we can do. And we won't get anything by forcing an injured man to talk."

"What a fool. If we could defeat the Blue Stalker, he might just survive, but I guess he prefers almost certain death."

"Again, he says he'll handle it in our stead. Let's take him at his word and just protect the Grys-Vok and Apharmd until the storm passes. We can each take care of one of them, right? The fewer sacrifices the better, even if we can't reduce it to zero."

They both breathed an exasperated sigh and readily started for the hospital room's exit.

That careless treatment caused unease to rapidly swell up in the man's chest.

…Almost like someone had slapped a "limited time only" sticker onto a product he had not particularly wanted.

"W-w-w-wait-wait-wait!!"

"…Yes?"

Kamijou looked back and words flowed from the man's mouth like a tap had been opened.

"I don't know much! I don't really know the Blue Stalker! I was only hired to kidnap that Furashina Ririn kid and take her to him!!"

"Sigh. That's not really enough to set up an ambush for him."

"I'll tell you everything I know!! We were paid via an online bank. He of course tried to eliminate all traces, but I don't think it was perfect. I'll give you the data. A-and we were given a location to take the kid! Of course, I'm sure he knows the deal fell through, so I doubt anyone'll show up if you lie in wait there. But…!!"

"The Blue Stalker was building up a foundation in Academy City using what he inherited from a certain old man," said Accelerator. "But people aren't as easy to inherit as money. I managed to get a list of the people working for the old man, but the Blue Stalker could only use the very lowest members. At that level, they probably didn't even know they were working as that old man's pawns."

"Eh? Huh?"

"The Blue Stalker might have been personally waiting somewhere with a view of the drop-off point. And if he was there for long enough, he might have left some kind of trace."

"W-will I be…safe?"

"You'd better pray on that one. Oh, and one other thing."

“Wh-what?”

Kamijou asked one final question of the fearful man.

“How much do you know about Furashina Ririn?”

“Almost nothing. We were only given a photo and a map of her general field of activity. Also…”

“?”

“We were told she’s tougher than she looks, so it would take quite a lot to kill her.”

“…”

Now that they had the necessary information, Kamijou and Accelerator really did leave the hospital room.

The #1 monster sounded half-exasperate as he walked down the dark hallway.

“You’re a scary guy.”

“How many times do you think I’ve tangled with monsters like you? I have far too many examples to follow when it comes to playing the frightening young man for a bluff.”

Kamijou spat out the words like he was suffering under a large weight bearing down on his shoulders.

But he was unaware.

Getting whatever information you wanted without laying a finger on someone was a feat that not even many in the city’s dark side could pull off with much success.

Part 7

The first thing they did was visit a waste treatment plant in District 7.

Most trash in Academy City was recycled, but it was far more active at some times than others. Simply put, its peak activity was from early morning to evening, so it was completely stopped in the middle of the night. It did not handle valuable materials, so the security was lax and it was easy to sneak into. That meant it was used for dangerous deals much more often than the abandoned buildings that were already marked as hotbeds of crime.

And…

“There are tire tracks from something other than garbage trucks.”

Accelerator crouched down and traced his fingers across the asphalt.

“And based on the way they overlap, this is the topmost one…it’s relatively fresh. It may have been after the place shut down for the day.”

“Can we really follow that?”

“Even you can do it now.”

Accelerator spoke with a mocking tone and pulled out his portable device.

He aimed scanner on the back toward the ground.

“The Material Analyze?”

“Lilina, scan this tire track. But expand the definition and selection range to cover the entirety of the track.”

The small device hummed and emitted a ring of light much like the Ring Scan.

It was almost like AR. When viewed through the screen, even the faint tire track was highlighted so it was visible with the naked eye. His selection was literally visualized.

The Material Analyze required approaching the target, but as long as it was connected by a single line, it fell within the selection range no matter how far it spread. For example, scanning a car from the side would still gather information on the opposite door. The entire car was a single unit.

So if he selected the tire track, the selection range could spread to anywhere in the city.

“Let’s go. Unless the bastard changed vehicles midway, this’ll lead us right to him.”

While following the tire track on the screen, they wandered around a fair bit and ultimately found themselves among the automated factories of District 17. However, they were not at one of those factories. It was a giant warehouse within a line of similarly designed buildings.

Kamijou looked up at it.

“Is this the place?”

“If you have time for stupid questions, how about keeping your guard up?”

There was a human-sized door next to the giant shutters, but the locks on both were meaningless. When Accelerator grabbed and turned the knob, the internal structure was destroyed with a metallic noise.

There was of course no light inside.

They had to rely on the backlight of Accelerator’s portable device as he walked around with his cane.

The vast space contained something like a jungle gym made of metal pipes and diagonal metal panels. However, it did not fill the entire space and seemed to mostly fill in the edges.

“What is that…?”

There seemed to be a disconcerting empty space in the center. Kamijou thought for a bit, pulled out his portable device, and aimed it toward the center of the warehouse.

And he spoke to the small device.

“Lilina, do you have data on that blue Cypher? Place a life-size image of it on the screen.”

“Aye, sir.”

The AR-enhanced scene fit perfectly.

The giant jungle gym surrounded the Cypher when it was down on one knee. This was scaffolding. There was a small stairway up to the V-Disc on its back and it was positioned so someone could climb in as if there was a tunnel there.

But.

(What for…?)

Normally, Virtuaroids were rearranged and maintained on the portable device’s screen. A life-size hangar was not needed, so did the Blue Stalker simply have some odd habits?

“There’s one set of footprints.” Accelerator was investigating something else. “Lilina, record a sample of the footprints, search for similar ones in the area, and redisplay.”

In no time, the screen highlighted all of the footprints that presumably belonged to the Blue Stalker. The #1 slowly followed that trail and looked around the area.

Half impressed and half exasperated, Kamijou spoke up.

“Your Lilina is pretty amazing. Or am I just not using mine right?”

“But why is that Lilina so quiet?” asked Kamijou’s Lilina. “Was she not raised with enough love?”

Then Accelerator called over to him from a short distance away.

“Look.”

He pulled back a blue plastic sheet to reveal a small safe. As usual, Accelerator tapped it with his toes and the door burst open from within. It was full of papers. But these were not in Japanese. They were in…hexadecimal? They were filled by the digits 0-9 and letters A-F, so it was an odd sight.

Was the Blue Stalker able to read them without passing them through a machine first?

“Lilina, scan the pages and decrypt them. I don’t know if it’s possible, but try to translate them to Japanese.”

“No, that’s not what we need to do, dumbass.”

As Kamijou spread the documents out on the floor and gave his portable device some instructions, Accelerator spoke to him like he was a moron.

“If he really didn’t want the information getting out, he’d hide it in his own head. And this safe is too sloppy. If he had time to encrypt the documents, it’d be better to burn them. Plus, if he’s working alone, he wouldn’t need documents spelling out his plan. There’s only one other reason to leave behind something like this.”

“Wait. You mean…?”

“An obvious safe with meaningful-looking encrypted documents inside. It’s obvious what the Blue Stalker is doing: keeping any intruders here for a while.”

Meaning…

“It’s coming!! Some kind of attack is going to blow the entire warehouse away!!”

Someone clicked their tongue.

It was lucky they were holding their portable devices for investigation purposes.

Kamijou’s vision blurred and then he found himself inside Temjin’s cockpit.

A moment later, a blinding beam of light surged through.

More and more glowing projectiles were fired. They pierced the warehouse’s thick walls from outside and swept forcefully from one side to the other. Kamijou’s Temjin rolled to slip below them and Accelerator’s Specineff just ignored the attack. He did not even raise his Ifleesa scythe. As soon as a beam touched the surface of his sharp and pointed Virtuaroid, the light’s path bent like it had passed through a prism. It tore even more complexly through the warehouse’s walls, sending them crashing down in pieces.

This was clearly more than a normal Defected Virtuaroid. It could directly damage a normal building instead of just other Virtuaroids.

And.

Their enemy stood at the source of the attack.

That unique Cypher was colored blue with bright yellow lines.

Looking at it again showed how out of the ordinary it was.

No, the unit itself was not all that different. It had a Virtuaroid’s unique streamlined curves that could not be reproduced by any metal or mineral of this world. Even if Temjin, Specineff, and Cypher had their individual traits, they all still fell under the category of Virtuaroids.

But.

Something that could only be described as its core was different.

That feeling oozed out from it.

It was like the difference between a child holding a real sword and a master wielding a bamboo sword. Which one would inspire more fear of death? Could the pilot really change the impression of a unit to this extent?

“Blue Stalker!!” roared Kamijou.

But before any response arrived, something changed in an unexpected place.

“Ksshh, processing speed…overload…critical…overflow…”

“Lilina?”

“Ahg67FsmAhwhMk**hAoshguiTo*NN1OtuskliSJia546gO*Nu**cdimARi***go90Sul***chi, beeee

“It is once more a cutting-edge weapon meant to efficiently kill and achieve victory in Limited Wars.”

Lightning surged out horizontally.

By the time Kamijou realized that was the Blue Stalker’s afterimage, the first exchange was already over.

His enemy wielded a fearsome close-range sword as long as he was tall. A single hit from that could easily bisect him and the sight of it made him shudder.

A tremendous amount of sparks flew from Temjin’s Blitz Saber that he had immediately raised.

He had not seen the movement, but his body had kept up on its own.

More and more clashes followed. Kamijou was inside the cockpit, but the vibrations still hit him with enough force to shake his cheeks.

Meanwhile, small windows appeared out of the way of his vision.

Lilina could not speak with him, but she was apparently still doing the job he had left with her. A few of the documents found in the warehouse had already been translated into Japanese.

Each time he read through one, he processed it into something he could understand. Was it thanks to his contact and firsthand experience with Virtuaroids that he was able to rework all of that strange terminology into something that made some sense to him?

He wanted to know anything he could.

Even as the tension scorched his skin, something stirred in his heart.

He wanted to know even the most trivial detail if it might help him win. He hoped it would let him decode this person known as the Blue Stalker and predict what he would do next.

His eyelids trembled and his lips twisted, but he wanted even the tiniest shred of data now!!

——The Tangram is an existence that can be called the central point of all things.

(Is it talking about an observer who views the entire world? Sounds like someone important.)

——It is a single existence, yet it simultaneously holds alibis in all parallel worlds.

(To put it in terms of the quantum theory used in esper development, is this some ridiculous being that shares all results of the different “ifs” that are influenced by observation? If it can choose the individual outcomes, then it’s sounding something like a god.)

——Successfully contacting it will place the entire world in the palm of your hand. You will be able to manipulate time, causality, destiny, and all such unreachable things.

(Contact? Is there a way for humans to control god? Would that make you into something

like an almighty esper with control over the entire world instead of just fire or water or something?)

——On the other hand, the Tangram has something like a will of its own, so even if you do contact it, it will reject you if you are not accepted.

(If something like that went berserk, well, I can see how that would end badly. So does this Tangram god have a mind of its own?)

——That rejection takes an incredibly simple form. The power of the Tangram eternally exiles you to one of the infinitely expanding parallel worlds and you trade places with the same person in a different dimension.

(So basically, it's like using a time machine to make it so you were never born? No, it sounds more like you're swapped out with someone who looks just like you and they take over your body.)

"Can you imagine what kind of place my home was?"

The blue enemy unit blurred as it made repeated high-speed dashes to the left and right using quick bursts of repulsion. Or so it seemed until the Blue Stalker vanished from Kamijou's view. He sensed the killer intent circle behind him.

But before he could turn around, Accelerator's Specineff launched a jump kick like a shooting star. That eerie, demonic-looking unit repeatedly swelled out and settled down as if it was suppressing something trying to burst out.

The blue cypher allowed its humanoid form to collapse. Its silhouette crumpled into something halfway between human and fighter jet, but that allowed it to just barely avoid Specineff's kick. That unique silhouette shifted its center of gravity more than would have been possible otherwise and it quickly slammed on the brakes. And like a bursting liquid being played in reverse, it regained its humanoid form and once more targeted Kamijou.

Kamijou's movements finally caught up.

Temjin swung his Blitz Saber while turning around and locked blades with the blue Cypher's brutal blade that had been targeting his back.

(He isn't remotely fazed that it's 2-against-1!! In fact, it's more like he uses his Virtuaroid entirely differently. It's like the difference between sport karate and an ancient art of assassination!!)

"It was awful. Truly awful. A few corporate groups monopolized the top and placed a lid on the heavens. Even war was turned into a tool of entertainment and the resources and land were worn away. The people did everything they could to ignore how obviously we were sucking the world dry and tried to believe they were the winners. …But the worst part of all was how almost all superior technology was focused on a single point and those who did not receive its blessings were doomed to fall."

——We were not chosen by the Tangram. That must be a role exclusive to L'Ln Plajiner.

(Chosen? Role? Is it like a fingerprint scan and only a specific person will be accepted by this Tangram god?)

——But there is a way to make use of not being chosen.

(…?)

——The Tangram exiles the unchosen to a parallel world. Person A in the one world is swapped out with Person A in the other world.

(The same paradox as before? So in our world, it would be like the birth a different person with the same name. But from his perspective, it would feel like being exiled.)

——From the perspective of the original world, it is no different from having your existence erased.

(Why is he so focused on that method of exile? And he makes it sound like it can be used in a positive way.)

——But we are not actually annihilated.

(Don't tell me…)

——We travel to another world, a world of possibility.

(There are other possibilities there.)

——Yes, for example…

(Which means…)

——There is only one of that loathsome L'Ln Plajiner in a world, but in another world, we might run across her in a different form. An easier to manipulate form.

(Did the Blue Stalker contact the Tangram to intentionally have it go berserk to gamble on the unknown alternate world it would send him to!? Even if that means giving up his position in his original world to someone from another world entirely!?)

"L'Ln Plajiner. She was chosen as the sole individual to discover, use, develop, and operate our world's technology. She was also a donor and gatekeeper for technology. …There had to be something else that plays an extremely similar role in this world."

That was not Furashina Ririn.

It was another term that came to Kamijou Touma's mind.

"You can't mean…Academy City!?"

"That is the Plajiner bud in this world. Ha ha. Even I was shocked by the level of freedom

between parallel worlds when I learned a single girl had changed into an entire city!!”

——We will acquire a second L’Ln Plajiner.

(That means Furashina Ririn, right?)

——We will acquire her and bring her back to our original world.

(Where is that? The world that originally developed the Virtuaroids? But is there a way to get back after being rejected by that Tangram god?)

——The field of possibilities was closed because that girl ruled as the gatekeeper to all technology.

(Just like how Academy City leads the science side… So is that role held by a single person called L’Ln Plajiner in that world?)

——If two Plajiners exist, the world’s equilibrium should collapse.

(Well, if a second Academy City suddenly popped into existence, who can say how far the chaos would spread.)

——The Tangram that sent us away exists simultaneously in all parallel worlds.

(…)

——And no matter what form it takes, if we control the Plajiner bud once it blooms, the Tangram will accept “her” as having the exact same inherent existence values as the first L’Ln Plajiner.

(Inherent…? I’m not sure what that means. Is it like saying the Tangram is locked to anyone but L’Ln Plajiner, so they’re going to bring in a second person with identical biometrics to try to access that god?)

——So we only need think about continuing forward.

(If he assumes he’s heading back, he doesn’t need to worry about what happens to us afterwards.)

——The completed second L’Ln Plajiner can take care of the rest and we can control the Tangram’s power to return us to our original world.

(Nothing matters to him as long as he can use Furashina Ririn to manipulate the Tangram god.)

——Including myself, 1003 people were intentionally exiled. And if just one of us gets the Plajiner bud to bloom in one of those 1003 parallel worlds, we can rule over the Tangram which controls all causality and phenomena.

(So it was more than just the Blue Stalker? Did they just send a whole bunch of people in the hopes that one of them would happen across a world with favorable conditions?)

——Those who fail can be brought back by the one who succeeds, so we can achieve our goal with zero losses.

(The people sent to different worlds can be retrieved using the Tangram which is connected to all worlds, so they can cancel it all out. That's the theory they're relying on.

——That is why this is known as Code Phoenix.

(A suicide mission with an assumed resurrection at the end.)

——This is a phoenix's mission in which we fully erase our existence to achieve our goal.

(But shouldn't that kind of genius be able to realize how wrong all of this is!?)

Temjin, Specineff, and the blue Cypher all came to a stop.

(The point judgement still exists? But he blew Mikoto away in a single hit.)

90 seconds had passed and the first set was over.

The result could not have been more obvious.

(No, it keeps going as long as I can keep moving. But if I'm bisected by his sword, it's all over!)

The Blue Stalker won the set.

But Kamijou did not care. He shouted the words in his chest.

"In that case!! Are you after what I think you are!?"

"Yes! Furashina Ririn is not my goal. Academy City is the Plajiner bud and I will contain the entire city in the form of a girl. I will capture her in that form and take her back to my original world!! Academy City and L'Ln Plajiner are more than just doppelgangers; they are the very same being. It just so happens that the possibilities of parallel worlds gave her the form of a city in one world and of a person in the other. So I remade her. And now I will make her mine. Because the second key, the Second Plajiner, can access the Tangram!!"

The second set began.

Accelerator's Specineff moved once more behind the blue Cypher.

He raised the Ifleesa scythe.

If he had built his own Level 5 power into it as Misaka Mikoto had, that Specineff would have his reflection.

But the Blue Stalker moved just after Specineff charged in.

While locking weapons, he intentionally pulled back his close-range sword while shifting one leg back. He seemed to be opening the way and that caused Kamijou's Temjin to pitch forward due to pushing "forward" with such great strength. The Temjin lost his balance and stepped forward, so the blue Cypher slipped past him and kicked him in the back.

And that sent him toward Accelerator's Specineff and his reflection.

"…!?"

They were going to collide and the reflection would tear him to pieces.

But if one of them survived, they could defeat the blue Cypher. Since the Blue Stalker had altered the rules and regulations, he would not escape unscathed if he was defeated.

So it did not matter which one.

Even if Kamijou was defeated and destroyed here, turning him into an NPC player, the #1 monster could crush the blue Cypher.

As long as Index and Mikoto were returned to normal, nothing else mattered.

So he raised his voice.

"Just do iiii

shoved the Temjin away in that instant. The blinding beam pierced the unit's chest. It punched through. The Specineff came to a complete stop this time.

It had been destroyed.

No, it was just like with Misaka Mikoto…

"…Ksshh…"

There was static.

"It would've been the same either way."

The static formed a human voice.

"So you do it. It would probably be meaningless for me to help with this problem."

The voice vanished inside a great cacophony of static that sounded like everything falling apart. The stalled Specineff and the pilot inside vanished into the ether.

"Oh."

And.

Kamijou Touma grasped the instant of opportunity available to him.

The Blue Stalker had prioritized defeating Accelerator, so he had used a sniping attack which left a lot of openings. Kamijou was in position to make full use of that slight moment of stillness.

"Ohhhh

Due to the unnatural silhouette, large gaps had opened in the module, leaving it defenseless.

A single hit could easily deliver a fatal blow.

But…

“Not good enough…!!”

Just as he felt the slash miss, he saw the Blue Stalker completing his change to the fighter jet form.

He was finally using his full power.

That Virtuaroid would become a gust of wind that used overwhelming speed to slice through its target.

Or it was supposed to.

But in reality, there was a sound of gears breaking followed by the blue Cypher grinding to a halt. His transformation had not completed. Something had jammed it.

After checking on the details, the Blue Stalker’s eyes must have widened in shock.

“What…? Temjin’s close-range sword!?”

It was caught inside.

The tip of the Blitz Saber was stuck between the armor panels that were supposed to fold cleanly together during the transformation. It looked a lot like a giant hammer with the blue Cypher as the head.

“…”

Kamijou had nothing more to say.

He whirled his body around with all his might and used centrifugal force to swing the “hammer” down.

The flying bird was slammed down to earth with enough force to create a giant crater.

Part 8

The blue Cypher was smashed to pieces.

Due to its excellent transformation structure, it was hard to tell what any individual piece did. Some parts looked a lot like arms or legs and others looked more like wings or weapons.

Either way, it was obvious he could no longer fight.

He had brought things back to the “original war” to blow away Misaka Mikoto and probably Index and Furashina Ririn as well, but that had been turned back against him.

And even if he was back to normal when the 3rd set began, Kamijou would not fall back.

Was it over now, or would it be over next time?

That was the only difference.

The Blue Stalker could be defeated. Knowing that meant a lot.

“So will everything go back to normal now?” wondered Kamijou inside Temjin.

He received an immediate answer.

“Yes, it will. In the way I wanted it to.”

“The Blue…Stalker?”

Kamijou looked over to the smashed-up remains of the Cypher.

A V-Disc was sticking out from the crushed V-Converter.

“In another dimension, Academy City was a single girl: L’Ln Plajiner. That worldwide joker develops and manages all cutting-edge technology. Neither form is more correct. They are both correct answers. They simply took different forms among the branching possibilities of the parallel worlds. So all I had to do was return her to the form I wanted. As long as she took the same form as the girl with full access to the Tangram, nothing else mattered. That was all I needed to win.”

“What are you talking about? You can’t just transform Academy City. The entire city would disappear and you’d be caught in the middle!!”

“All I had to do was complete Furashina Ririn, the Second Plajiner. Once she passed a certain stage, the transformation would continue without my interference. No one can stop it now. I will return to that universe of death and resignation that is ruled by the plants and Limited Wars. I will return to blow a new hole in it. Academy City and myself inside it are no more than the rocket engine needed to achieve escape velocity. No matter what must be purged and discarded along the way, I will succeed as long as the payload is placed in orbit.”

For just an instant, something burst from the cracked and scarred V-Disc.

It looked like a young man wearing a strange suit.

But Kamijou could not say for sure.

After all, his eyes were dyed pitch black and an unnatural darkness lurked within them.

“You…?”

“It does not matter what ‘I’ am.”

The darkness scoffed.

The black in his eyes spread to the rest of his body. No, his body peeled away and collapsed.

“The man who attempted Code Phoenix failed at some point and became a part of ‘me’. I am the unified desire to return home of all my brethren who were rejected by the Tangram in the past and sent to different parallel worlds. Or perhaps I began as that and have split off into something else. It matters not as long as I can remain here as the Blue Stalker who obsessively seeks the Plajiner girl.”

“…”

Hadn’t the Academy City report mentioned that the Blue Stalker’s identity was completely unknown? But another document had said if Person A was rejected by the Tangram, they would be swapped out with Person A in a parallel world. So they were not entirely annihilated and they did not just appear out of thin air. But the Blue Stalker alone functioned under different rules.

Was this what had happened?

Was he a collection of desires, so the Tangram had been unable to find someone to swap him out with?

“Did you think killing me was enough to stop the transformation? You are already seeing the center of the transformation. And I am of course not referring to myself. The time bomb’s timer has already reached zero. It was counting down even as we fought this pointless battle. Even if I lost once, I could still return using the Second Plajiner, so this is checkmate. This city will change. I lost the right to watch it from a front row seat, but I will pass that right along to the victor.”

Kssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssshhhh

fate.

Between the Lines 3

I am the Plajiner bud.

No, I am the second one…so you can call me the Second Plajiner.

There is no essential difference between L'Ln Plajiner and Academy City and neither is superior to the other. They both function as a singularity that develops, uses, and manages the technology that holds a world together. They simply developed in different directions because they hold the position to freely alter the entire state of affairs in their world. Originally, comparing the two would have been meaningless.

The Blue Stalker – the man who chose that name based on the clothing I wear (or rather, that all Plajiners wear) – intended to find the Plajiners that had evolved in a different direction due to the branching of the parallel worlds (yes, it could be a book of prophecy, a supercomputer, an alien planet, or whatever other possibility a world provided) and to transform it into the physical body of the girl he knew as L'Ln Plajiner.

Just as this world would collapse if it contained two Academy Cities, two L'Ln Plajiners in his world would bring down the social order that puts great focus on the Tangram and is ruled by advanced technology and giant corporate groups.

I defined that chaos as destruction, but the Blue Stalker seemed to view it as salvation.

That may be why sleep is the proper state for me. The more I am conscious and the more I do, the more I will disturb this world's order and bring the Second Plajiner closer to completion. Just as blood will clot to stop the bleeding from a wound, this city will take action if I feel I am lacking something. The fact that I can directly manipulate the language written within the V-Discs is a sign that I am gradually approaching completion.

Looking at what has happened, I should have been more cautious.

I should have ignored the smaller matters to focus on the overall result.

But oddly, I do not regret running across that boy. It's hard to decide who saved who, but in the short time since my appearance to now, I can say those were worthwhile memories.

Farewell, kind world.

Perhaps I was blessed to be able to define my enemy that way.

……
……

What am I saying?

I can't accept this at all. I don't understand.

I tried to be tough, do the mature thing, act smart, and find a logical resolution to the situation I find myself in, but I can't keep the static from filling my mind.

I mean…why?

Why did this have to happen to me?

Just by waking up in this world, I doomed Academy City to destruction. I had no choice in the matter. I wasn't given the option to refuse. Someone had me mimic some other person called L'Ln Plajiner and called me the master key to some strange thing called the Tangram. That was all there was for me. No matter what succeeded or how it failed, there was no way for me to get what I wanted.

I will fight.

Against what? For who?

If I have to begin a battle with everyone who intends to prevent Academy City's destruction, will I have to cross blades with the boy I met in that park?

Why?

What is this?

I don't want to do this. I want to step down right this instant. But what awaits me then? Can I live a normal life just like everyone else? Will I not break apart and crumble away the instant I step outside what that strange Blue Stalker man wants from me? Please listen. Can you please listen to what I have to say before turning hostile eyes in my direction or viewing me with fear in your heart?

No.

Please help me.

I know no one will hear me and I know no one will answer me even if they can hear me. There's no way for them to. But I'll still say it.

Someone.

Please help me.

Chapter 4

Part 1

The change was instantaneous.

Kamijou heard a sticky sound from below Temjin's feet. Then the ground melted away like ice cream dropped onto the pavement on a hot day.

No, it was more than just the ground.

The wind turbines, the building walls, the roadside trees, and the rest of the scenery lost their color and shape like chocolate melted with a blowtorch. It all mixed together. The general silhouettes remained the same, but there was no guarantee that would last.

"Kssshhh!! …Ksshh… Touma-sama, the change seems to be starting from the bottom and working its way up. The taller buildings are showing no change, so I recommend using your repulsion to jump to a rooftop while making sure you don't hit anything sticking out from the walls!"

"Lilina, you're back?"

"Sob… It really scares me that my self-scan shows nothing out of the ordinary. That doesn't mean I'm safe; it has to mean I just can't locate the cause! I mean, there's clearly some kind of error here!!"

Anything was fine as long as he had her support.

He used the turbo for a running start.

And then Temjin used the invisible repulsion to leap in a high arc like a long throw in baseball. He kicked off a few sticky walls along the way, made his way ever higher, and ultimately reached the top of a high-rise building.

As Lilina had said, the area near the roof was unchanged.

But the world below could not have been worse.

Everything was melting. It all mixed together while gradually changing shape. It felt like peering inside a giant creature's stomach with an endoscope.

There was no way any Virtual-On matches could continue like this, but there were still lots of

referee spheres floating here and there. However, not one of them was functioning properly. They were spinning erratically as they observed meaningless locations.

“Lilina.”

“Yes, what is it?”

“The Blue Stalker made it sound like Virtual-On was remade during the design stage to create the Second Plajiner. He said it was originally a tool of war but he distributed it here after remaking it into a Next Generation Game. That means there have to be traces of him at the most fundamental levels. Does that include you, Lilina?”

“A search does not turn up any information, but that may not be grounds for rejecting the idea,” replied Lilina. “I am a voice processing program meant to help make Virtual-On run more smoothly. Whether it is an enjoyable game or some strange plan I am helping ‘run more smoothly’, I cannot refuse. That is what it means to be a program. There appear to be similarities between Ririn and myself, so it is possible I am an emulation control program meant to control the Second Plajiner.”

“I see…”

“Will you delete me?”

Those words seemed to deny herself.

And Kamijou answered by shaking his head.

“No, let’s keep going like this.”

“Are you sure you want to entrust your fate to something created by the Blue Stalker?”

“How is the Virtuaroid itself any different? I’m not about to think I can survive in this melting city with just my right hand.” He took a slow breath. “So I’ll use whatever is available to me. And that includes you, Lilina.”

“Okay. Understood, Touma-sama.”

At that moment, the situation changed.

The building rooftop had seemed relatively safe, but now it wobbled. It was like being atop a stick standing up from the sand as it slowly toppled from having water poured on it.

“Touma-sama!!”

“!!”

He used the repulsion to leap as high as he could manage, but Virtuaroids were not made to fly indefinitely. This was no more than the extension of a jump.

And the surrounding buildings also collapsed one after another.

There was nowhere nearby to land. And with no footing, he could only slowly fall.

In fact…

“What…is that?”

A gaping hole opened in the world.

It looked like a single point had opened up in the surface world that looked like black fuel oil, but then it expanded seemingly endlessly. It may have swallowed up the entire district.

There was nothing he could do.

The few remaining buildings fell into the expanding hole. He could not imagine how deep it was, but it was all too obvious that falling into it was the end.

“Rescanning the map. Touma-sama, there is a reading near the center of the hole. Is it… floating? Regardless, there is something like land there!”

“What the hell is that!? Should we really go toward it?!”

“Virtuaroids cannot fly. If you do not make up your mind soon, you will be stuck falling into that empty darkness!!”

She was right.

He had no other option.

Kamijou decided anything was better than falling into a hole that looked like it led to the depths of hell, so he focused on the turbo while altering Temjin’s actions. He fell toward the sole safe zone at the center of the massive hole.

Even when viewed from above, it was an odd place.

Something measuring several kilometers across floated at the center of 360 degrees of black waterfalls. No, floating was not quite accurate. Something like thick blood vessels colored a muddy pitch black extended horizontally and attached to the walls on the outer edge. Those blood vessels pulsated disconcertingly and seemed to be absorbing something.

“Warning: please keep an eye on your sense of perspective. Objects on too large a scale can affect your sense of distance.”

It was right in front of him, but he could not find any words with which to describe it.

It looked like a giant mass of metal. It was a cuboid measuring several kilometers across. It looked like a thick bomb shelter and like a spaceship meant to escape the solar system. But the most distinctive feature was the giant spherical bulge near the center that completely ruined the otherwise perfect silhouette.

Kamijou did not know what that was.

But his instincts told him it looked like a giant embedded eyeball that was staring at him.

He gulped as he saw something else.

At a point in his vision, an FCS cursor appeared at the top of the unknown structure.

Temjin had detected some kind of reading.

“There’s something there.”

“It is definitely an enemy unit reading, although an unclassifiable one. …It’s…not a Virtuaroid?”

“I really don’t want my navigator sounding so doubtful!”

“It’s making me question my purpose in life too. At the very least, I can’t find a corresponding unit in any of the data in my archive. But at the same time, a Virtuaroid is only supposed to be able to lock onto another Virtuaroid…”

“Has it been modified so much with the Material Analyze that it’s unrecognizable?”

“I can only imagine this is a new unit built from scratch. Although I can’t classify it as a Virtuaroid if it doesn’t have a V-Disc to support its structure.”

“In that case…”

A name came to Kamijou’s mind.

As a more fundamental question, were there any survivors in Academy City besides Kamijou Touma and her?

With that in mind, he shouted the name.

“The Second Plajiner!?”

Part 2

District 7 was now a giant hole.

A several-kilometer structure with black waterfalls all around looked like a spaceship or a coffin with a giant eyeball embedded in it.

That was the truly odd final piece of land.

Everything else in Academy City had melted away into an abdominal cavity as Temjin gently landed on that rectangular survival zone.

A single unit had its back to him.

It was bizarrely shaped.

All Virtuaroids had a few parts in common, but their overall silhouettes were all different. Some looked like weapons with thick armor covering them while others looked like girls thanks to their slender and streamlined silhouettes.

But even compared to all of that variety, this looked out of place.

For one, it had no real armor. It only had hands and ankles attached to arms and legs that looked like flat belts. The torso was only connected by what looked like a spine. The smooth rib-like armor and pelvis-like armor just barely gave it a feminine motif.

On top of that, it lacked the V-Converter containing a V-Disc that all units supposedly had.

It had nothing inside.

In that case, what was supporting it?

But that may have been what made it so abnormal.

This was something that had been unable to become a Virtuaroid despite being so very similar to one.

That structure should have been impossible, but perhaps that was why it was the appropriate ruler for phenomena that should have been impossible.

Or was that just more evidence that it was incomplete?

It was like an incomplete human. Had the pursuit of that image given her this form?

Once the city had fully melted together and she had her perfect physical form, would the Second Plajiner show off that beautiful form to the world?

To Kamijou, that was the final signal that everyone's destruction was confirmed and they could never be returned to normal.

"Touma-sama, we are receiving a communication request from username-…"

"Go ahead and accept it."

There were only 2 people in this world, so the boy did not need to wait.

A calm voice played as if the needle had been placed on the record.

"…I'm sorry."

"There's nothing for you to apologize for."

"But I did this to your world…"

“That isn’t your sin.”

The enemy he had to defeat stood before his eyes.

This being had been established by swallowing the land, buildings, equipment, people, and everything else. If he did not defeat her, then Index, Misaka Mikoto, Accelerator who had left this to him, and everyone else would never return.

He could not avoid fighting. He had to win this no matter what.

But.

Even so.

Nevertheless.

Kamijou decided that hating this girl was decisively wrong.

“You understand, don’t you?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“The Blue Stalker no longer matters. I have already been placed on the rails to my completion. So I cannot end this battle even though I want to. And I won’t be completed without swallowing up everything, including you.”

“I know that. This is like a pupa deciding whether to emerge or to return to being a larva. This battle is forcing that decision onto you, isn’t it?”

The Temjin slowly raised his Blitz Saber close-range sword.

And he spoke.

“But.”

He understood it all, and yet…

“Even if you’re an enemy of this world, you’re still a girl I know. Nothing will change who Furashina Ririn is.”

“…”

The transmission fell briefly silent.

The slight breath he heard might have been quiet laughter.

And a moment later, all of the referee spheres ceased moving randomly throughout the city and instead focused in on them.

The entire melted world – in other words, the Second Plajiner’s flesh and blood – bared its fangs against Kamijou Touma.

The final battle had begun.

Part 3

There was no time limit, points counter, set number, or anything else.

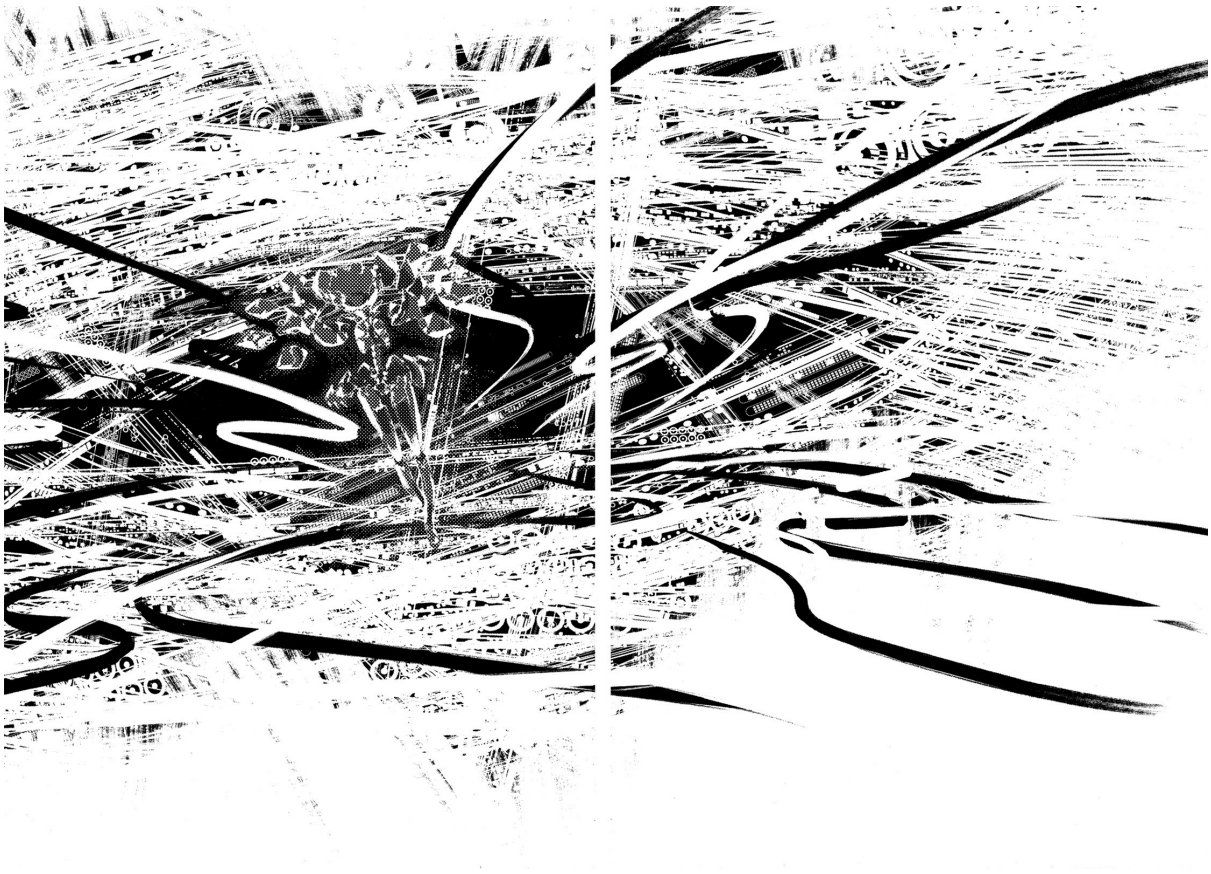
“Uuh… All of the displays are messed up. This is no normal battle, Touma-sama.”

“One look at the city is enough to tell that.”

With the rules and world melted away, all that remained were Temjin and the Second Plajiner.

Thus, the only possible resolution was for one to destroy the other.

Would the pupa emerge and spread its wing, or would it revert to a larva?



The Second Plajiner only had a flat artificial skeleton and had no weapons whatsoever.

She simply pointed her palm Temjin’s way. And that palm glowed red.

Kamijou felt an invisible pressure, like he was being glared at.

That was all.

Or it should have been.

But a moment later, the entire scenery transformed as if drawn along with the outstretched hand.

The ground at his feet gained a giant spear-like point, swelled out, and tried to pierce Kamijou's Temjin.

"Wha-…!!!???"

Something stabbed up through the ground he stood on. He immediately produced repulsion for a high-speed dash to dodge sideways with all his might. The air was torn apart, the heavens were pierced, and the forcibly compressed air scattered shockwaves every which way. That was all it took to nearly knock Temjin off balance.

Meanwhile, the Second Plajiner slowly pointed her red glowing hand his way.

No claw-like close-range swords jutted out from the fingers and no thick lasers were launched from the palm.

Based on how it seemed to work, it was more like…

"A bombing target designator!?"

How large was it really? The repeated attacks felt like a giant's sword was stabbing up from the depths of the earth. Kamijou had his hands full dodging, but he still attempted to fire on the Second Plajiner from a distance. However…

(!? She's gone!!)

"Touma-sama, up above!"

The slender unit had created a dragon-like swelling below her own feet to carry her up like a rocket. And she continued to aim her red glowing palm toward Kamijou. But she was not just targeting his Temjin directly. The melting walls around him would react and grow countless sharp and biological-looking horns or jaws.

An unpleasant sensation ran down his spine just before an overwhelming blast of light assaulted him from all directions.

The horns launched beams of light like lightning strikes and the jaws split open to spit out massive glowing projectiles. Kamijou used the blessings of Defection to make quick dashes in every direction to just barely dodge it all, but then the Second Plajiner herself made her move.

At the top of a smooth tower, she spun like a gymnast atop the protrusion she had used to fly

so high.

As her heel moved around, the massive dragon swelling up from the ground began to rotate. It bent in an upside down U-shape, looking like a plesiosaur biting at prey on the land. The slender unit and the dragon became a giant hammer and approached like a meteor.

There was a deafening noise and a blinding light.

An overwhelming barrage of light destroyed everything in every direction.

(Uuh.)

“Ohhhh

bigger than a box of chocolates. That device and its sticks and buttons for his thumbs were his only lifeline.

There was nothing inside the cocoon. Even without a seatbelt, his body was naturally fixed inside the seat and there were none of the monitors, buttons, and switches that would fill a fighter craft. Optional settings could alter the layout to one's liking, but the small device in his hands was all he needed to control the machine.

But no one really knew if that lifeline was really there or not.

The device and even his own existence "inside" the machine were uncertain.

But he could touch it and it would respond accordingly, so there was no problem.

"…!!"

The world rapidly opened up around him.

He was not simply receiving information through a monitor. He sat inside the cocoon-like machine, yet he could clearly sense the heat of the air, a burning smell, and even some presences and killer intent that did not fall under any of his five senses.

He finally remembered.

He raised his heavy head and bit his rusty-tasting lips.

He outputted what he needed to do.

"Listen, Temjin," he groaned. "You aren't a tool of killing. I won't let you be one."

He touched the device in his hands once more. He stroked the top of the sticks with his thumbs and confirmed its solid presence with his entire hands. He entrusted everything to it.

And he spoke.

"So help me out here. Help me save that girl!!"

Part 5

He remembered.

He opened his eyes.

He breathed life back into Temjin.

"…!!!!!!"

He had avoided a direct hit from the Second Plajiner's meteor-like attack from above. But the shockwave it scattered in every direction had battered the unit.

But he was still moving.

He could still move.

Kamijou used the repulsion to jump up and escape the waterfall of rubble from the spaceship-like structure made of an unknown substance, but the Second Plajiner pointed her red glowing palm toward the pieces of rubble.

Several spears attacked the heavens.

They bent in midair to target Temjin like a giant's fingers closing to crush him. Countless horns and jaws welled up and filled space with a storm of light meant to cut off the slight remaining avenues of escape.

"Kh!! And I bet a single hit would be enough to take out that flat and hollow body!!"

"Warning!! Incoming attacks from the north, west, south, east, northwest…wahhh!! Incoming attacks from every direction!!"

There was no point in paying any attention to the storm of warnings at this point.

He chose to charge toward the approaching dinosaur and avoided the barrage as if swimming through the light. At the last second, he planted his feet on the side of the tower-like thing and used further repulsion to leap from the slight contact point created by the soles of his feet. He jumped around like a pinball to dodge the attacks while moving straight toward the Second Plajiner.

He entered close range.

His weapon gauges swapped out.

"!!"

After landing right in front of her, he tempted her to attack and then slid sideways. He swung his Blitz Saber around, but each time, something melted would spiral around the enemy unit and block his attack. The same thing occurred each time he attacked. More and more obstacles appeared to defend against Kamijou's attacks.

And it went beyond that.

The spiraling substance swelled out like a balloon. No, it burst. A tremendous shock pushed Temjin's giant body straight back. He nearly lost balance and stiffened slightly.

And the world itself moved to take advantage of that opening.

"Touma-sama!! There's a warning from behind!!"

He practically fell over to dodge the drill-like attack from behind. Having lost its target, the

dragon approached its supposed master: the Second Plajiner.

By then, Kamijou had already pushed his turbo to activate the repulsion for a high-speed dash.

With a high-pitched noise, the deadly dragon and the shield meant to block all close-range attacks both shattered. An unstoppable force had met an unmovable object and this was the simple answer to what happened when the strongest collided with the hardest.

So for just an instant, the dragon and the barrage of light were wrapped in emptiness.

This created a slight opening.

And as that self-destruction occurred, Temjin forced out his top speed even from his collapsed position. He raised his close-range sword again and this time arrived within the close-range barrier.

“Ahhhh

like her was being returned to oblivion instead of reaching true completion. She was truly, honestly, and utterly glad that everyone would be returned to their peaceful world without any sacrifices.

So she smiled.

He was strong.

Kamijou Touma was strong.

He was not like Academy City's Level 5s who had simply implanted the special abilities they already had. Nor was he like the Blue Stalker who had mastered the art of Virtuaroid piloting as a severe and optimized tool of war.

His Temjin had nothing special.

He had only used the Material Analyze feature to incorporate the normal scenery of a normal park. But had he realized that by cutting out and gathering together the small world in which he lived, his own presence and essence could show through?

Didn't Academy City use the term Personal Reality?

On one side was a city that had been dragged into Blue Stalker's plan and reformed into the Second Plajiner. On the other side was a Virtuaroid that had taken the warm lives they led and made that a portion of its power. Looking at it that way, there was no way she could win. Furashina had forcibly usurped it and Kamijou had naturally made it his. The difference in power was clear.

Of course she could not win.

And she was glad she could not win.

So she smiled.

"Yes…"

Time seemed to have stopped for her.

And as she viewed the death approaching her, she spoke to herself.

"I wanted someone to save me too."

She knew she could not be allowed to live.

That was certain.

She did not belong and anything she did would destroy Academy City, so she could never have shared a smile with the people who lived there.

But.

Even so.

She had enjoyed watching the boys and girls playing with the Virtuaroids that were not weapons of war. She had wanted to join them. The more she remained conscious, the more Academy City would change and the more it would be remade into the Second Plajiner's flesh and blood. So she should have remained unconscious as much as possible. But she had failed to do so. It was not the flashing beams of light or the rumbling din of combat that had roused her. It was the heat, joy, unity, and happiness of the people there that had thrown Furashina Ririn from the cradle of apathy.

That was over too.

This was the best possible path she could imagine.

With her defeat, the Second Plajiner's refinement process would stop and Academy City would return to its original form.

No other path was better.

She could not hope for anything better.

So.

She shut down the transmission so that final line would not reach him.

All alone, everything was swallowed up in that cramped space.

And yet.

And yet!

And yet!!!!!!

It happened a moment later.

Something unbelievable occurred before her eyes.

The apparent passage of time had also slowed to a crawl for Kamijou Touma in his Temjin.

He had worked the gears of his mind until he thought his head would fry, but he could not find a way to save Furashina Ririn. He did not know what to do. He was cut off at every turn.

But.

Even so.

He thought about it hard. He considered it deeply.

Absolutely.

No matter what happened.

He did not want to choose a path that ended everything by bloodying this girl. He had to place the melting city, Index, Misaka Mikoto, and Accelerator on the scales and weigh them against sacrificing Furashina Ririn, but that only strengthened his resolve. There was no answer to be found and he was only postponing the problem in this extreme situation, but he ended up relying on that thought however he could.

That was not a happy ending.

He had to save every last person: Index and the others, Academy City, and Furashina Ririn too.

So.

“I’m sorry, Temjin…”

With time seemingly stopped as he charged straight toward the briefly defenseless Second Plajiner, Kamijou Touma spoke.

A scream-like sound reached him from behind. Temjin’s V-Disc had to have heated to its limit. But that was not just because of Kamijou’s reckless actions to reach this point.

It was his right hand.

Imagine Breaker.

Just as Misaka Mikoto had placed her Railgun inside her Raiden and just as Accelerator had sealed the power of the strongest inside his Specineff, what if the unknown within Kamijou Touma were sent inside his Temjin?

His right hand had been powerless against the Apharmd and Grys-Vok weapons, but what if something changed here and it began to function?

Logical thought was useless here.

So the spiky-haired boy obeyed his instincts and roared.

“I want to save Furashina Ririn!! I want to reach out to the girl in front of me who’s curled up and can’t even ask for help! So please! Please!! You clench your teeth too, Temjin!!!!!!”

The portable device in his hand could not be operated by voice. His fingers on the buttons and sticks were the only options. The gauges and switches inside the cocoon-like cockpit were only for show. So did his shout mean anything at all?

It may not have.

But a moment later, the scream from the V-Disc died down. All of the noise grew gentle and even, like a record spinning atop a properly-made record player.

“Don’t worry,” said Lilina.

She spoke on behalf of something that had no voice of its own.

“Everyone has their own way of controlling a Virtuaroid. If this is your way and you define Temjin in that way with a specific goal in mind…then the Virtuaroid will surely do as you wish.”

Those words pushed on his back.

He felt like he had been saved by the support of someone without a voice.

Using the Material Analyze feature, Temjin had made the bugs, birds, and scenery around Kamijou into his power. That would mean this contained everything he believed to be “normal”. It was not a creepy exception or something coldhearted and special. It contained everything needed to naturally maintain Index, Misaka Mikoto, and so many other people’s smiles day by day.

This was not made to defeat.

It was wrong to use it to kill.

With this Virtuaroid…

With this Temjin, he could look at it another way.

He was certain of it.

So he looked straight ahead.

He stared at his enemy. No, at the person he had to save.

He saw a girl there who he would not let anyone refer to as the Second Plajiner.

“Furashinaaa

The Second Plajiner and Kamijou's Temjin were both blasted from the point of impact. The power to destroy supernatural powers and nothing else was propagated from his arm, to his torso, and to every other part of his body. The Virtuaroid crumbled like a shattered ice sculpture.

The same was true of the V-Converter on Temjin's back. No, of the V-Disc contained inside.

The motor deck cover fell away.

The contents burst out in a twisted form.

As the disc crumbled, flew through the air, and tried to stop spinning, Kamijou Touma's body slipped out from its surface like a magic trick or like a fairy rising from a spring.

He had not known he could eject like this.

He more or less understood that something…no, someone had helped him. They left everything with him as if saying "go", "it isn't over yet", "don't swallow the saliva you spat from your mouth", or "prove your words were more than just for show".

He thanked them.

And he then looked forward.

He faced the contradictory unit that had shed as much weight as possible and carried no V-Disc. It was clearly not thick enough to hold someone inside, but its ribs pulled back and the small upper body of a familiar form was ejected.

It was Furashina Ririn.

Kamijou reached out his hand without thinking. What good would that do? Would Imagine Breaker not affect her? Even if he did drag her out of the unit, what would happen to the melted Academy City or Index and the others?

He knew nothing.

He found no answers.

But this was a different issue. There was a girl in front of him who wished for death, had decided that was the best possible answer, had given up on tears and asking for help, and was biting her lip while curled up all alone. He believed that was enough of a reason to reach out his hand. He might have no idea what would happen to the world or the others, but he would figure that out after saving the person in front of him. It seemed foolish to abandon someone he could save now because he was worried about what might happen in the distant future. If they had to choose between regaining their everyday life through a sacrifice and regaining their everyday life while rejecting someone's sacrifice, everyone would prefer the latter. So while it might be somewhat more difficult and it might require a detour, he was willing to accept that.

Some might call it selfish and some might say he was defining people's feelings for his own

purposes.

But he still believed in this.

Kamijou believed in the human heart, in good will, and in justice.

So.

He did not need a second's hesitation before choosing to grab Furashina Ririn's hand and to fully pull her from the crumbling Second Plajiner unit.

He held her slender body tightly in his arms.

The Second Plajiner completely shattered and crumbled. What would have happened to her if he had taken even a little longer to pull her out? He could not imagine the answer, but that did not matter.

What mattered was the girl in front of him now.

He knew she had not really wanted to do this, but the role of the world's destroyer had been forced onto her by someone else.

That was enough for him.

The words naturally left him.

"It's going to be okay."

He had lost his unit and been thrown out into space, but he still said it.

He did not know what would happen in the future and he did not know how to solve this, but he said it regardless.

"None of this Tangram and Plajiner stuff matters. If you think anything else is going to be taken from you, I'll destroy every last one of those illusions. So you don't need to worry about anything else."

Furashina Ririn said nothing.

He could not see her expression as he held her in his arms.

But she wrapped her slender arms around his back. Her small hands clutched his clothing.

That was enough. That was more than enough to tell him what she thought.

And yet.

Something moved.

It happened before gravity could pull them down once more and before they could be slammed into the ground.

The sole remaining surface looked like a giant spaceship and like a structure to contain an eerie eyeball, but it began to squirm. Something moved, shaking the air to produce noise.

No, to produce a voice.

“It’s going to be okay? Hardly. You don’t need to worry? Think again.”

He recognized the voice.

He had never met them directly, but he had heard it from the cockpit.

“The Blue Stalker!?”

“Didn’t I tell you it doesn’t matter if I lose once as long as I ultimately gain the Second Plajiner and return to the other world? The Second Plajiner has consumed Academy City as an alternate form of L’Ln Plajiner and it has crystallized. Now Code Phoenix enters its final stage. I will contact the Tangram that links all parallel worlds and return to my world of true Virtuaroids. Harvest has arrived, so it’s time I reaped the true key of Plajiner.”

That slender girl had not been the Second Plajiner.

That skinny unit had not been the Second Plajiner.

“Under the current rules, the destruction of both sides results in a draw which means a loss for both sides.”

It had all been the core needed for the crystallization that focused the giant structure of Academy City on a single point. That may have been why that unit had lacked a V-Disc. Furashina Ririn herself had been the core which had accumulated a vast amount of information, so the term “Second Plajiner” referred to the entirety of the vast melted location.

So there was no need to wait until they landed.

The entire scenery grew distorted as thousands and tens of thousands of giant, pitch-black arms burst out and swallowed up Kamijou and Furashina.

Imagine Breaker and the boy’s silly promise were utterly useless in the face of such overwhelming quantity.

Part 7

What time was it, what was this place, and how much distance was there?

Kamijou Touma did not know.

He could not perceive his own body, much less anyone else. He had his five senses but not his body. Not even the translucent body seen in out-of-body experiences in movies and dramas. He felt helpless, like he was a worthless speck of light in an inconceivably vast world.

No, that was not it.

The helplessness and loneliness may have come from the lack of warmth in his arms from the girl he was supposedly holding.

(Where's Furashina…!?)

He had no idea what was going on, but Kamijou still looked around.

As soon as he shifted his focus to the outside world, the scene changed.

It was like the entire universe had opened up.

The distinction between front and back, left and right, and even up and down had little meaning in this infinitely expanding space. Points of light flashed here and there in the dark space. He could not tell if they were expressing a will like his own or if they indicated stars or worlds.

But there was something with an overwhelming presence in the center of the space.

It looked like the ultimate manmade object and also like a biological eyeball.

Kamijou was reminded of the spaceship-like structure from when he had fought the Second Plajiner unit.

Had that been modeled after this?

Had the Blue Stalker designed the stage that way because of his desire for this?

And another thought occurred to him.

He had no real basis for it, though.

(That is not of our world. It shouldn't be there.)

No, that was not quite accurate.

It was everywhere and crossed between every world, but that was why it could not be allowed to remain in a single world and be monopolized by that world. So as the puny resident of a single world, Kamijou felt a pain as he viewed it. It felt like an invisible "heart" or "soul" within him was being worn away.

This was the ruler and gatekeeper that connected every parallel world.

Only one possibility came to mind.

“The Tangram!!”

As soon as he said that, something flashed.

They were two small lights. They were much like Kamijou now and he could tell they were racing toward the giant eyeball. No, one of them was caught by the other, held in the other’s grasp, and being dragged around. It was all in order to forcibly approach and contact the Tangram.

They had no faces and no bodies.

But he still immediately identified them.

(The Blue Stalker and…)

“…Furashina!!”

There was no need to hesitate. He had no reason to just watch.

He would save her.

With that purpose in mind, his point of light also raced toward the Tangram at dizzying speed. He began a headlong charge to take Furashina Ririn back from the Blue Stalker.

The Tangram grew to fill his vision, but the distance between them never seemed to shrink. It was simply too big. It felt like chasing after the sun.

And his attempts to catch up to the Blue Stalker were not going well either. The closer he got, the greater the ferocious headwind that obstructed his progress.

The point of light spoke mockingly ahead of him.

“It’s useless. The Tangram is the highest being that binds all dimensions together, but it also chooses who can contact it. Those who are rejected are repelled and vanish into one of the infinite parallel worlds. And they are swapped out by someone from that world. You are not qualified. As far as I know, only the Plajiner girl has ever accomplished that.”

“!!”

“And I have acquired the Plajiner girl. In my own way. By sacrificing a world and using the singularity of technological development known as Academy City, I have duplicated the master key! So the Tangram will accept me. My primary objective is returning home, but if I have a means of doing so in a comfortable manner, I must make use of it. I will use that gate to return to my original world where Virtuaroids are weapons of war. Once there, I will bring freedom to the world by letting the two Plajiners meet and lock up. There is no good or evil here, boy. Only the acknowledgment of correct or incorrect!!”

Kamijou did not care.

He did not care about that.

The Tangram, Plajiner, parallel worlds, and the master key did not matter to him. To Kamijou Touma, the one and only absolute rule was the presence of a girl who was not even allowed to shed tears.

After all, she had conveyed her will in the very, very end.

After being dragged from the Second Plajiner, Furashina Ririn had wrapped her arms around Kamijou's back as he held her. She had clutched his clothes in her small hands.

That was enough for him.

Even if she had not spoken to him or written him a letter, Furashina Ririn had already confessed her feelings.

She did not want this.

She had not accepted it.

She wanted to live.

She wanted someone to save her.

So the real Virtual-On did not matter. The power balance of that world could eat shit. By destroying everything, bringing it to failure, ruining it all, picking a fight, and selfishly and willfully refusing to hold back, Kamijou Touma was only trying to say one thing.

He would keep his promise.

He would save her.

"Ahhhh

There were no physical bodies in this world, so he could only see a point of light. Still, he instinctually realized who it was.

“Lilina!?”

“Hi, Touma-sama. It’s your lovely partner, Lilina-chan.”

Why was she here?

How could she resist the Tangram’s frightening power of rejection that forced all things into random parallel worlds?

“Given my appearance, there’s a good possibility I’m an external emulation control program for the Second Plajiner based on Furashina Ririn.” Lilina sounded exasperated. “The Tangram only accepts the original L’Ln Plajiner or a copy as its master key, right? Then wouldn’t I have a small right to control since I was modeled after her in a different way?”

“…”

“Well, it’s probably more accurate to say the Blue Stalker made me as insurance in case the Furashina Ririn plan failed, but he was a real fool to prepare multiple access points. Did he not know that more openings makes it easier for a cyber attack to get in?”

But Lilina shouldn’t have been able to do anything alone.

Furashina Ririn was the complete master key and Lilina was only a partial one.

To put it another way, Furashina Ririn was the completed jigsaw puzzle and Lilina was just one piece.

That would be why the Blue Stalker had given Furashina Ririn top priority.

However…

“Who ever said I’m the only Lilina?”

He had not expected that.

And the next thing he knew, they were not the only points of light.

“Whether legal or Defected, every device had the Lilina support AI preinstalled. They all grasped their player’s traits and grew into different Lilinas as they conversed with their player. And unfortunately for him, the Blue Stalker had all of us absorbed and stored within the Second Plajiner. That means we were dragged in here.”

There were more than just 1 or 2 of them.

In fact, there were more than just 10 or 20.

Kamijou suddenly found a full starry sky twinkling behind him.

“Now, Touma-sama. Give me your orders as always,” said Lilina. “Everyone is wishing for it. We don’t matter. Who could possibly bear to watch as Furashina Ririn is forced into such an unfair situation, mocked and manipulated by the Blue Stalker, and transformed into the villain’s master key? So we’re all waiting for your words as the final survivor who can save her. We want you to say that the rules of the true Virtual-On don’t matter and you can throw out any concern for the power balance in the true Academy City. We want you to say that one rule remains even if you get rid of all that and view the world as a blank slate. We want you to say that there is always one kind, unwritten rule that no one can violate, even if it seems overly convenient. We want you to say you believe that. So say that to the world. No, say it to that damn eyeball that links every world together! Say it to that piece of junk called the Tangram that thinks it makes all the rules! Show it you have the absolute words needed to reach it!! Touma-sama!!”

“…”

He accepted it.

He took it in.

He grasped it.

He had no body in this world and thus could not form a fist, but the boy named Kamijou Touma still clenched something.

“I don’t care how powerful a being the Tangram is, I don’t care if the Blue Stalker is protected by its absolute power, and I don’t care how hopeless Furashina Ririn’s situation might be.”

And he finally said it.

He was picking a fight with something.

“I will save her despite all that. Yes, I will save her!! Because she let me know she doesn’t want to die! Because she was glad, because she wrapped her arms around my back, and because she grabbed at my clothes!! Because she wished to live longer and she prayed to be happier. So I’ll give her what she wanted, no matter how high the hurdle in the way! No matter how difficult it might be!! Because it’s worth going through all that!!!!!”

He psyched everything up.

Kamijou Touma was no longer alone. He shook the hearts of all of the beings twinkling in that starry sky.

“So lend me your power!! I will make your dreams come true. You want to know someone will reach out their hand if a girl can’t even cry. You want to know that exceedingly convenient rule exists. Well, I’ll prove that it does!! And I’ll destroy anyone who gets in the way of that! They might say we can’t protect anyone, we can’t save anyone, and we can’t make anyone happy! But I’ll destroy every last one of those illusions!! I’ll show you that here! So, Lilina!! Each and every one you!! Lend me every last drop of your powerrrr

He let out a crazed roar, but everyone began moving calmly.

The immense number of lights, the countless Lilinas, all pushed on his back.

From there, it was like he was equipped with a rocket engine.

He was in hot pursuit.

It did not matter how far ahead the Blue Stalker and Furashina Ririn had gotten. With the support of as many Lilinas as there were stars in the sky, Kamijou Touma approached in the blink of an eye.

But as he got closer, the headwind from the Tangram grew.

The Blue Stalker sounded concerned, but he still mocked Kamijou.

“It’s no use. I have the full master key. That patchwork emulation might fool the Tangram to an extent, but only so far. You will be rejected by the Tangram in the end. It is only a matter of sooner or later.”

With another 10,000 kilometers, he might have been able to kick the Blue Stalker’s ass.

With another 5000 kilometers, he might have been able to grab Furashina Ririn.

But they were too close to the Tangram.

The Blue Stalker and Furashina Ririn would reach the giant eyeball before he fully caught up. Once that happened, they would leap to another world and Kamijou and the Lilinas would be unable to interfere. He would be unable to save the girl known as Furashina Ririn.

He charged onward with all his might.

He had no arms or legs in this world, but he still stretched his mental fingertips toward the girl’s point of light.

But he did not reach her.

He did not make it in time.

The true rules that treated Virtuaroids as weapons of war were far heavier and absolute than the boy’s pathetic cry. So it was a matter of correct or incorrect, not good or evil, and the Blue Stalker was prioritized. He would be accepted by the Tangram, he would contact it, he would freely cross between parallel worlds, and he would be given the power to rearrange history.

“Ahhhh

The ending was approaching fast.

In the end, this would establish a rule saying that there are girls in the world that cannot be saved.

But just before that happened, something far too large moved its gaze.

“……Ah.”

The one caught off guard first was the Blue Stalker.

At the same time, there was a torrent of tremendous power. It was the ferocious headwind of the Tangram’s power of rejection. The Blue Stalker had held a position of absolute safety, but now he came to a stop. He was held back. Even though he held Furashina Ririn, the master key known as the Second Plajiner.

“What!? Why am I being rejected!? I was scattered among countless parallel worlds and rejected by you, but I finally, finally had the answer! This was the greatest possible Code Phoenix, so why is it unraveling in the final stage!?”

Kamijou also sensed the change as he pursued from behind.

The Tangram was an incomprehensible being that looked biological yet also dull and bland. But it had changed. Its appearance remained the same, but he could sense something oozing out from within.

It was almost like someone had accessed a previously automated robot and was now controlling it remotely.

But who could do that?

This being existed across every dimension and parallel world, reigned as the gatekeeper and ruler, and would eternally exile those it rejected to a random world. Who was the one and only person with the authorization to fully access the Tangram despite the risk?

“It can’t be…” muttered the Lilina right by his side.

Kamijou could also only think of one possibility.

“Is that the true L’Ln Plajiner!?”

He did not know what intention she had for this.

He did not know what she would benefit from this.

He did not know what emotions led her to do this.

But in the end, that absolute being had made her judgment against the wicked man who had destroyed an entire world in his greed, pursued a girl, and remade her into a copy of a girl who held a godlike position.

And she had judged him “incorrect”.

Thus the rejection began.

“T-to hell with this. The power to gain it all was right there. I had the master key in hand. I had Plajiner right here. And yet…and…and…
byaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

The next thing he knew, he was speaking.

And it quickly rose to an obvious shout.

“I can’t just let this happen. I’m sick of just letting some big shot have their way! Blue Stalker, whether I’m going to forgive you or whatever else, I won’t be satisfied until I’ve gotten one good punch in on you!! So give it back!! Give back my conclusioooooooooooooooooooooooooooooon!!”

He did not have a fist or even a physical body.

He had no idea if Imagine Breaker even worked here.

But Kamijou Touma was here.

That fact could not be denied.

So as a point of light, he charged forward at top speed. He shot toward the Blue Stalker who was pushed back by the Tangram’s power of rejection but just barely managed to hang on like a spiteful serpent.

Kamijou did not know what would happen.

He simply collided with the man.

Kamijou Touma broke through the center of the Blue Stalker’s point of light, causing it to burst into a million pieces.

There was not even a scream.

The tiny particles were swept away somewhere. They showed no sign of resistance.

Kamijou could not even imagine what kind of parallel world they would end up in or what form they would take there.

But he instinctually understood that the Blue Stalker there would be nothing like the one he knew.

He had finally gotten an attack in.

He had not left the conclusion to someone else.

He had settled things with someone who had harmed his precious friends and he now bore a certain sin in exchange.

“Sorry.”

A single point of light remained afterwards. It was that lone girl.

Kamijou Touma slammed on the brakes to stop alongside her and spoke to Furashina Ririn.

His words were brief but powerful.

“But I finally caught up.”

There was no response.

He concluded she was filled with something that could not be expressed with simple words.

And the change did not stop there.

Now that he had finally reached Furashina Ririn, Kamijou realized that something like an impossibly thin layer of filth was peeling away from what had looked like a point of light.

“The mechanism set up by the Blue Stalker is being removed,” said Lilina.

“Hm? You mean…?”

“I can’t believe it. The Blue Stalker’s mechanism was definitely wicked, but Furashina Ririn could not have existed without it. It was keeping the world in a ridiculous state where a girl with no physical form was given physical form. With the mechanism gone, Furashina Ririn should naturally disappear. But she’s not!? This is logically impossible, but something is forcibly establishing that logic!! It’s almost like some new rules were prepared to secure her safety!!”

It was cheating.

It was absolute.

It was salvation.

This was the judgment of the one who was meant to control the Tangram. Since her role had been taken from her, she was playfully helping out elsewhere. It was a chaotic mixture of solemnity and charm, of strictness and fun. This was different from the gods of legend who each fulfilled a single role. This was not on a level where she might lose believers if she allowed an exceptional action. This being reigned supreme in a dimension different from the puny boy who had only been able to yell and reach out his hand and who had been able to promise but not guarantee.

She had been saved.

She had saved her.

Kamijou Touma had to accept that he had only been able to fight and had thus failed.

“L’-…!!”

He looked to the Tangram and tried to yell something, but he could not.

He was hit by an absolute headwind far more powerful than the one that had hit the Blue Stalker. The overwhelming torrent prevented him from clenching his teeth or holding his position. And unlike the one that had exiled the Blue Stalker, he sensed precise directionality

in this current.

It wordlessly told him to return to his world.

And just before he was blown away, Kamijou saw it.

It was often said that eyes can say as much as the mouth.

When he saw the strange emblem carved into the Tangram's surface, he felt like the meaning contained there had changed ever so slightly.

Part 8

And they were blown away.

Kamijou Touma and Furashina Ririn were swept back to their home.

Yes.

The one causing this was using the action to say she wished for Furashina Ririn to belong to that world.

Epilogue

Simply put, nothing remained.

There was no trace of the city's destruction, no one had any memory of facing the Second Plajiner, and there was no sign of the Next Generation Game of Virtual-On in any form.

This had all begun from the desire to illegitimately use the Tangram which controlled all causality and phenomena. The Tangram had a will of its own, so as soon as it remembered something, it may have corrected everything.

So the city was back to normal.

The wind turbines spun, the produced electricity was swiftly gathered and redistributed, and lights came on in homes. People smiled like it was nothing and time passed like it was nothing. The city enjoyed completely normal days once more.

It all seemed to say that the tragedy had never occurred.

It all seemed to say that no one knew of Furashina Ririn's disappearance.

"Touma, have you seen Sphinx?"

"Hm? Wasn't he on that shelf over there? Cats like small and high places."

"Ah! There he is!!"

Index ran over, reached out, and grabbed the calico cat from the shelf.

And she embraced it.

Reluctant to leave, it threw a kitty punch into empty air.

On the shelf it had vacated was an unfamiliar handheld game system known as a portable device.

"…"

The small screen displayed an online news article.

The simple article said the following:

"The free game known as Cyber Troopers Virtual-On has really caught fire. The creator's name is Furashina Ririn. The game uses the popular portable device to let you control fictional robot weapons known as Virtuaroids and do battle in the actual streets around you.

The player's burden is reduced using the help of the support AI known as Lilina, so…"

That may have been different from its original form.

It may have been a different Virtual-On on a different path.

But.

Kamijou believed it would produce many more smiles than the one the Blue Stalker had sent into the world.

"Touma, what is it?"

"Oh, nothing."

The portable device must have entered sleep mode because its screen went dark.

Kamijou and Index walked to the front door to leave the room.

The door opened and closed.

Whatever form it takes and whatever it might entail, Virtual-On is still being played throughout Academy City.

Afterword

Okay, this is Kamachi Kazuma!

You probably already know, but this story started as a dream project where we decided to do some kind of crossover between A Certain Magical Index and Cyber Troopers Virtual-On!! If you think there had to be something really twisted to how this got started, let me tell you I was shocked by the odd power of connections I felt when the offer first arrived. It made me wonder how big or small this industry is. It's Virtual-On but there aren't two levers? Where's the jump cancel button? Why are they fighting over points instead of wearing down each other's gauges? I'm sure a lot of you were asking those questions, but that's because we prepared a whole new rulebook for this dream project instead of using the rules of the existing series. It might be surprising, but the overwhelming majority of these suggestions for "a different sort of Virtual-On" came from the Sega. …At first, I thought I should build up a world that strictly followed the Virtual-On side of things (and the more I looked into that, the more material I found to use), but when Watari-san saw the plot I had come up with, he sliced it in two and said I should do more of my own thing with it. I'm not sure how to explain what I felt then, but it really rattled me and reminded me that this was nothing like my usual jobs.

So I ended up basing the story on the Index side of things while having fun with the Virtual-On material I had.

If you asked me what my favorite Virtuaroids are, I would have to say Temjin or Fei-Yen. That might be cliché, but I think I may tend toward the ones with less idiosyncratic controls. That said, I'm a lot more interested in the Tangram than the Virtuaroids themselves. It chooses who to be with, it has incredible power but doesn't show it off and usually hides in an extradimensional place, it gets all tsun-tsun and drives away any strangers who approach, and it only has a connection with L'Ln Plajiner who created it. That round thing sounds like a shy tsundere to me. Maybe what grabbed my attention was how it has such a clear character even though it's inorganic(?).

I give my thanks to Watari-san and everyone else from Sega, to Katoki Hajime-san who not only designed the Second Plajiner and the other units but directly handled the illustrations as well, and to my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. I love wasting resources and talent like this. You often hear that the attention a book gets before release is important these days, but I think this should take care of that nicely. Thank you very much.

I also give my thanks to the readers. What did you think of this crossover that began as a dream project? I tried to keep things in the usual Academy City setting while bringing the battles to a scale I normally can't use. I hope you enjoyed it.

And I will end this here.

I hope the prefix of “dream” can be removed someday.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Toaru Majutsu no Index — Virtual On

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